THE TRUE STORY OF THE MARINES OF CHARLIE 1/1 IN VIETNAM, 11-12 OCTOBER 1967

LIONS OF MEDINA

DOYLE GLASS

AUTHOR OF *SWIFT SWORD*

Lions of Medina

by

Doyle D. Glass

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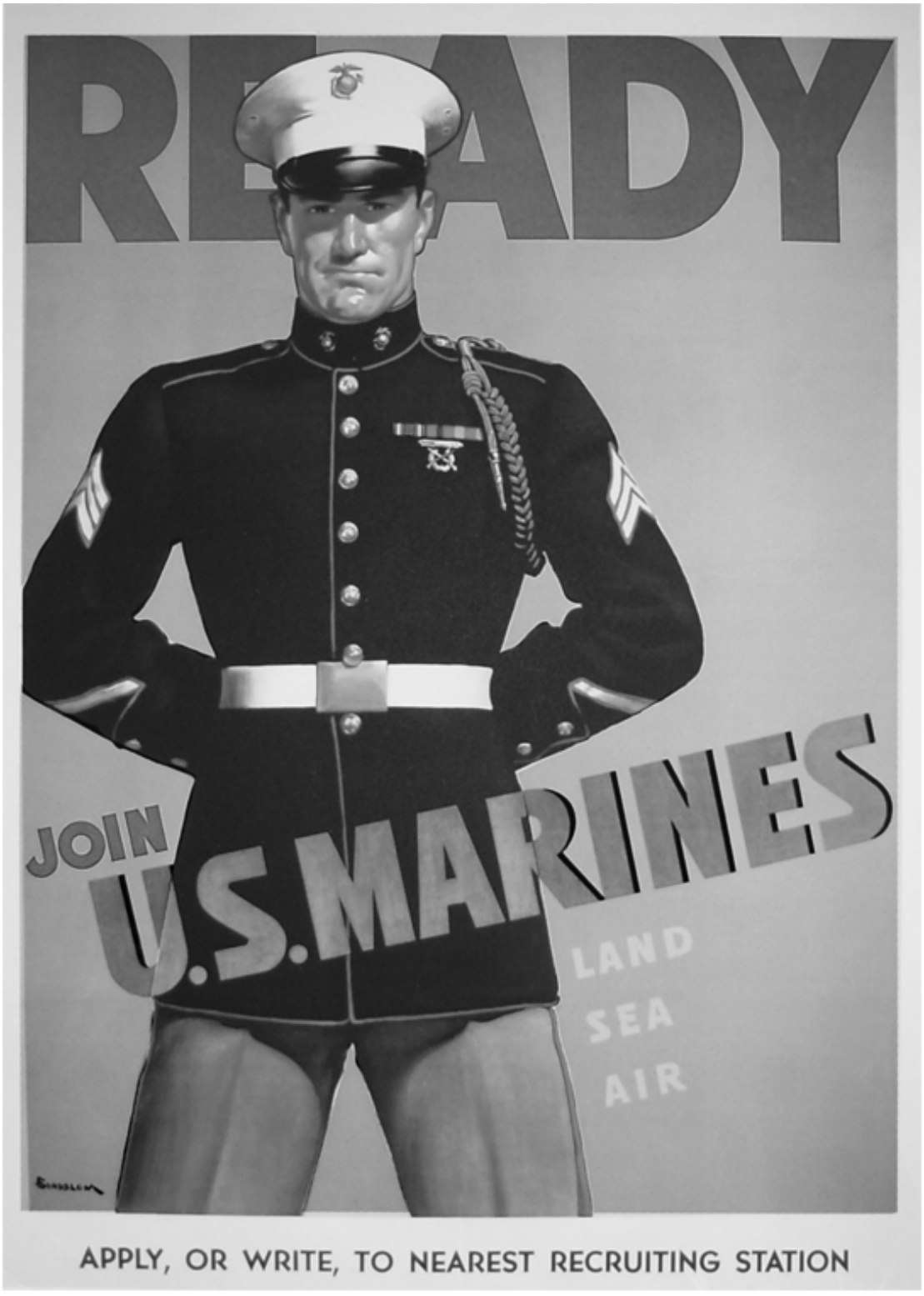
Marine Gunnery Sergeant Thomas Thompson (left), Captain Bill Major (center), commander of Charlie Company, and LCpl Michael E. LaVallee (right), Operation Medina, 13 October 1967.

War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things.

The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.

—John Stuart Mill


READY
JOIN
U.S.MARINES
LAND
SEA
AIR
APPLY, OR WRITE, TO NEAREST RECRUITING STATION

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1 The Few, The Proud

The Marines of Charlie Company, First Battalion, First Marine Regiment, First Marine Division were young. The average age of a rifleman was 19, an officer 24. Most were barely out of high school when they signed up. They had youthful enthusiasm, a taste for adventure, and a desire to see the world. Most were unmarried. Most had no idea what life in the Marine Corps was going to be like. Most had never thought about killing another man.

Many of them probably felt they could handle the physical demands of the Corps because they were athletes in high school. Salvador Bazulto and Gerald Brothers ran track. Jack Ruffer played football and wrestled. Scott Thorne ran track and played football. R.J. Jackson played baseball and basketball. Stan Blessing played baseball. Bill Perkins was on his high school swim team. Bill Major, commander of Company C, was also a competitive swimmer. Paul Nelson was his high school's conference champion in the four forty-yard dash.

Their lives read like typical American stories. Bill Perkins and his buddy Jim Priddy lived in the San Fernando Valley, just north of Hollywood. They spent hours in movie theaters watching comedies. They would imitate Groucho Marx or pretend to be Jonathan Winters' characters. They memorized the comedy routines of Bob Newhart and Lenny Bruce.

Standing about 5'9" with light brown hair, Perkins had an innate sense of what was funny. Interested in drama and photography, he played in his high school's production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.* Yet he was also athletic, interested in swimming and deep-sea diving. Although Priddy's interest leaned toward music because his father was in Glen Miller's band, he fostered Perkins' keen interest in photography by helping him take hundreds of pictures and making short films throughout high school.

Kermit Hammergren lived an all-American country life on a small, 80-acre farm in Missouri. Along with his three brothers and three sisters, he helped milk cows, raise chickens, and grow corn and other crops. His parents also worked in town at a shoe factory. Brad Foote of Bend, Oregon, lived on a dairy farm with his parents, two brothers, and two sisters. He had a bad habit of playing hooky from school.

George Dougherty was from a working-class Irish-American family in Brooklyn. Raised Catholic, he went to parochial school until he was 16. Then he dropped out and got a job. But he was headed in a troubling direction, experimenting with drugs and living a lifestyle that wasn't going anywhere.

Joe Zorn was also born in Brooklyn. During WWII, Joe's father served in the Army and saw combat in New Guinea. After the war, he was an ironworker and later became a New York City policeman.

Florida-born Oliver Bell was a great dancer with a lot of girlfriends and a lot of faith. One day, when the family lived in Grace Apartments in Pompano Beach, they were warned of an oncoming storm. His mother told Bell and his sister Minnie Mae to go to the back yard and board up the windows. Minnie Mae started to do as she was told, but her brother walked to the back yard and knelt down to pray. So his sister joined him. Then a neighbor knelt down next to them. And another neighbor knelt down. Soon practically the entire apartment complex was in the back yard praying. When the residents went inside and the storm eventually hit, the worst winds seemed to move over the apartment complex, destroying the park across the street instead. Grace Apartments were among the few buildings left untouched. Neighbors credited Bell's faith, and they knew they could find him in church every Sunday, singing with the choir.

Salvador Bazulto was also a good dancer. The Los Angeles native was the life of the party, a jokester who loved to make people laugh. The oldest of six children, Bazulto attended Woodrow Wilson High school in El Sereno and worshipped at St. Lucy's Catholic Church in City Terrace. He was very close to his parents and was a caring older brother to his siblings. He joined the Marine Corps in his senior year.

Born in New Jersey, Robert Anderson grew up around the country as his father accepted positions with different companies. The family, which included Anderson's older sister, Jane, lived in Connecticut and Virginia. He ended up finishing high school at Pompano Beach Senior High School in Florida. He then enrolled in Yale University, starting out taking English classes then switching to a focus in economics.

Anderson, who was 6'1" with light brown hair and spoke with a hint of a New Jersey accent, was more interested in the social life at Yale than his classes.

Phil Seymour grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts, just outside of

Boston. His parents divorced when he was young, and he lived with his mother. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life, but he saw adults around him with desk jobs and knew the office life was not for him.

Blond-haired Dave Welsh and his five siblings were also raised by their mother after a drunk driver killed Dave's father when Dave was 13.

Mike LaVallee of Minneapolis and his sister were raised by their mother and a stepfather following their parents' divorce. At 5'7" with a medium build, LaVallee had dark hair and eyes. Handsome and shy, he was also athletic and quick to dive into a fistfight. He attended St. Clements Catholic Church in northeast Minneapolis.

John Castillo was the son of Mexican immigrants who settled in Saginaw, Michigan, for the job opportunities there. He was the oldest of three sons and had two sisters. He was a Cub Scout and enjoyed spending time outdoors. He and his father spent hours fishing, and he also loved pets, especially his dog Charlie. In high school he worked at the local drugstore.

Morgan Bice grew up in a religious home where the family knelt in prayer every night and always said grace before meals. Born in Oklahoma and raised in Texas, most summer days he could be found with fishing pole or gun in hand, heading toward the great outdoors. He was protective of his four siblings. When he was in Texas City High School, he kept a close watch on his sister Carolyn, who was three years younger. He wanted to make sure she didn't date the wrong boys. He also took special care of the family dogs, Mindy and Skipper.

The young men of Charlie Company started out in hometowns across America but ended up in the same place: The U.S. Marine Corps. Mike Robinson joined on a dare. George Boze and Ed Yates became Marines to escape abuse at home. Brad Foote and Kevin Cahill joined after getting into minor trouble in school or with the law. Mark Anderson was sick of school and felt he was destined to serve in the military. Dan Snell and Rod Lewis had friends in the Corps. Steve Kane grew up in a strict Catholic household in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and attended schools with stern Catholic nuns, so he joined the Marines because he thought he needed a break.

Many of the recruits had family members who had served in the

military. Perkins' father flew B24s and B25s over the European theater in the Army Air Corps during World War II. John Lee's father was wounded serving in the Navy in World War II. Scott Thorne had a grandfather who served in World War I, as well as aunts and uncles who served in World War II and Korea. Bell's father and two uncles served in the Army in World War II. Ed Krisko's father served in the Navy in World War II, and his uncle was a Marine killed on Okinawa. Ron Coss, who grew up in Springfield, Ohio, had a father and grandfather who had served.

Hammergren, the farm boy from El Dorado Springs, Missouri, fulfilled a lifelong dream when he joined the Navy and became a corpsman, the medics who treat wounded Marines. He wanted to carry on the family tradition. He had an aunt who was a Navy WAVE, and she married a Navy man. His father and uncle both fought in World War II, his uncle as a Marine.

Morgan Bice also had a lifelong desire to be in the military, so much so that his grandmother called him "soldier boy." Bice's father had been an MP in the Army Air Corps during World War II.

Robert Anderson's father worked in the Army's New York Ordnance District in New York City during World War II. Attaining the rank of captain, he ended up being a troubleshooter, going around to munitions factories throughout the Northeast. He was awarded the Legion of Merit, at the time the highest non-combat medal awarded by the United States.

But some of the other men had the Corps in their blood. Mike Cole's father fought as a Marine in World War II. Cole picked the Marine Corps to prove to his father that he could make it through boot camp. Stan Blessing was named after a cousin who was a Marine and thought joining the same branch of service was the right thing to do. "That was where the real men were," he said.

Joe Zorn decided to join the Corps when he was about 9 years old. His main influence was an uncle who became a Marine shortly after the Korean War. "I saw him come home in his dress blues," Zorn recalls. "He told me that the Marines were the first to go in and were the toughest. I always wanted to be the best."

For others, the mystique of the Corps was the major deciding factor. Jack Ruffer was 5 years old and living at Hickam Field in Hawaii when he saw his first Marine, a guard at the entrance to the U.S. Naval Station at Pearl Harbor. The little boy was both fascinated

and intimidated by the Marine wearing starched khakis, spit-shined boondockers, and a .45 on his hip. Ruffer had seen military men before, but he felt this one was different, so he asked his mother about the man.

"Oh, he's a Marine," his mother said.

"What are Marines?" Ruffer asked innocently.

His mother searched for an answer. "They're … *different*," she finally said.

The impression of that Marine never left Ruffer. Growing up, he read *Battle Cry*, a novel about Marines in World War II, at least six times. He wanted to join the Corps to see if he could measure up. His parents, however, wanted him to go to college. When he insisted on joining the service, his father, an Air Force pilot, advised him to join the Air Force because he would receive training in a marketable skill. His father warned, "All the Marines train you for is killing, and the training is going to be very, very tough."

Even the boss at Ruffer's part-time job got into the act. Ruffer worked as a stock clerk at Henderson's Drug Store in Mount Prospect, Illinois. Mr. Henderson promised to increase Ruffer's hourly wage by 50 cents an hour – a huge increase in those days – and promote him to cashier if he stayed out of the service. All of their efforts were in vain. Jack Ruffer joined the Marine Corps.

Ruffer was not the only one with a calling to the Corps. Becoming a Marine was also the lifelong dream of Phil Hartranft. As a boy he saw *The Sands of Iwo Jima* – the movie where John Wayne portrays tough Marine Sergeant John Stryker in a bloody World War II battle– and had goose bumps for a month. "When I saw that movie," he says, "I wanted to be a Marine." Another motivator for him was the loyalty embodied in the Marine Corps motto. "They always preached how they would never leave you behind. If something happened, you wouldn't lay out there," he recalls. "That always stuck in my mind, as corny as that sounds. *Semper Fidelis*. Always Faithful."

The Sands of Iwo Jima was also one of Dougherty's favorites, and he thought the Marines were the best branch of the service. Tired of his life going nowhere, he had a strong desire to prove to himself and everyone around him that he could succeed. He realized the Marines offered that chance for success, so he signed up on his 17th birthday.

LaVallee didn't even consider another branch of the service. The

Marine Corps was his only choice. He considered himself to be a perfect match for the Marines, who never backed down from a fight.

George Hutchings grew up in Leopold, Missouri, a small town with a population of 140. But the tall, red-haired teenager knew he wouldn't be there long. He wanted to be a Marine. His father had served in the Army in World War II, and when he graduated from high school, Hutchings decided it was his turn to defend and serve his country. He chose the Marines to prove he could be as tough as anybody.

Wayne Dowd initially wanted to join the Corps to break his image as a "mama's boy." *Who is going to call a Marine a "mama's boy?"* he thought. Dowd, however, didn't want to be a rifleman. He wanted to care for Marines wounded in combat. That meant joining the Navy and completing Hospital Corps School and Field Medical School. He had an easy time getting in. Later, he found out why: corpsmen didn't last long in combat. Corpsmen joked that their life expectancy in an ambush was the same as the delay mechanism on a hand grenade: three to five seconds.

Others followed a longer path to the Corps. Paul Nelson received his bachelor's degree in business administration from Central Michigan University then had to decide what to do with his life. His brother, who had graduated from the Naval Academy, encouraged him to enroll in an officer's program. Nelson liked the idea of the Marine Corps. He was challenged by the Corps' image of being tough, efficient, and manly. He felt he could fit that image: the blond-haired young man was in shape and carried just the right amount of weight on his 5'9" frame. So he signed up to attend the Marine Corps Officer Candidates School in Quantico, Virginia.

John Castillo was studying drafting at Delta College in Saginaw when he decided to join the Marines. He knew the dangers of war: his father had been wounded in Germany in World War II, and the shrapnel injuries bothered him his entire life. Castillo chose the Marines because he wanted to be the best.

R.J. Jackson attended Los Angeles State College for a year and a half, but his grades weren't good and he wasn't interested in school. He decided to enlist but had to choose a branch of service. He noticed that in war movies, the Marines seemed to be the best trained. He also noticed the pride his older half-brothers had in being Marines. They had been rowdy young men who grew into

successful adults with families, and Jackson admired those results. Also, Jackson didn't want to serve on water or in the air, so the Navy and Air Force were out. Several of his uncles had served in the Army during World War II, but on 6 October 1966, Jackson left for Marine boot camp.

Rod Lewis attended Portland State University, but his grades were not good. Students were exempt from the draft – unless they failed to maintain a passing average. So he and a friend decided to enlist instead of waiting to be drafted. The obvious choice was to join the Navy because Lewis' grandfather, father, and uncle had all served in that branch of the service. But there was a problem: Lewis got seasick every time he was on water. He decided that the next best thing was the Marine Corps.

The Navy was also the goal of Bill Major, who wanted to be a naval aviator. But the day he was to fly to Washington, D.C., for his Navy physical, he injured his knee and had to have surgery. He was told that he would have to wait a year before he could take the physical. During that year he received a draft notice telling him he had to join a branch of the service. He had a tough choice to make: The Navy could not promise him flight school. The Marines, however, told him that he shouldn't have any trouble qualifying for flight school after Officer Candidates School. Major joined up with the Corps, but he never made it to flight school. It wasn't a bum knee that kept him out – later testing showed that his eyesight was not good enough to be a pilot.

Some of the men of Charlie Company were swayed by Marine recruiters. When the Marine recruiters were on the campus of his Florida high school, the first thing Scott Camil noticed was that girls were awed by the Marine uniforms. The sharply dressed recruiters told the young men that they were all going to get drafted out of high school and get sent to Vietnam. "It's your choice if you're going to be one of the best or go and be something else," they told the students.

Camil wanted to be one of the best, and he was also impressed by the slogan on the recruiting materials: "The Marine Corps builds men." So while still in high school, he signed up to be a Marine under the delayed entry program.

Recruiters also made an impact on Phil Seymour. As a student at Brookline High School in Massachusetts, he heard speeches by recruiters from all branches of service. He didn't pay much attention

until one day a Marine recruiter came to the school and said, “I’m not looking for all you people. I just want the one or two or the three who want a challenge and think they can make something of themselves in the Marine Corps.” The recruiter showed a short clip of Marines in action. That also appealed to Seymour, who had already decided he wasn’t cut out for a desk job. He also liked the Marine Corps’ tradition and esprit de corps.

So in 1965 when Seymour graduated from high school and turned 18, he couldn’t wait to go down to the Fargo Building in Boston and sign on the dotted line. Despite his strong desire to be a Marine, he started out as a six-month reservist, which would have meant six months active duty and then five and one-half years in the reserves. A friend who was a Korean War vet had suggested that Seymour should make sure the military life was what he really wanted. But Seymour liked what he saw in boot camp and quickly committed to the military.

Salvador Bazulto was not interested in waiting around. He knew what he wanted. He joined up before he graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in Los Angeles. His dark eyes and hair revealed his Mexican heritage, and he was a little shorter than many recruits, but he was determined to fit in among America’s finest fighters.

For Bell, a small, stocky black teen from Florida, the military was a good economic decision. Few good jobs were available for teens with no college education, especially for young black men. But the Veteran’s Administration would pay for college tuition and the military offered travel and occupational training opportunities, more than Bell could probably get otherwise. So shortly after he graduated from high school, he enlisted in the Corps.

Some of the men joined on the “buddy plan,” which allowed a recruit to join and attend boot camp with a friend. It sounded like a good idea, but the men soon discovered it meant nothing. Mark Anderson had planned to join the Army but joined the Marines because of the plan. He was disappointed. “The buddy plan didn’t mean a damn thing,” he recalls. “All you ended up doing was being in boot camp together. You couldn’t talk in boot camp any way unless you were spoken to.” During boot camp, he never spoke to the buddy he joined up with.

The buddy plan worked out better for Perkins and Priddy. They not only completed boot camp and training together, but they were also

constantly lined up next to each other or assigned to the same areas because their last names were next to each other alphabetically.

The plan, however, was not their first option. They were students at Pierce College, a junior college in Southern California, Perkins for photography and Priddy for chemistry. Perkins was accepted to UCLA's cinematography program but had to wait a year to get in. The two young men had no plans for military life. In fact, discipline was not high on their list of priorities on a July day in 1966 when they skipped their summer classes to go to the beach. Driving down Ventura Boulevard with another friend, they looked up at a billboard. Staring down at them was Uncle Sam, pointing a finger at them and saying, "Uncle Sam wants you."

Priddy said, "Let's go join the Marine Corps!" Perkins didn't need much persuasion. He was already a patriotic young man. He had grown up hearing stories about his great-grandfather's heroism in the Civil War and the service of his father in the Army Air Corps. He even marched with his grandfather in a Memorial Day parade. Bill was eager to follow his buddy's lead.

Perkins and Priddy weren't the only ones to find themselves in a Marine recruiter's office. Dennis Antal got called into the office of his high school principal, who laid out the facts: Antal's grades weren't good enough for college, and his parents didn't have money for tuition. Going into the service was his best option. One of Antal's friends joined the Navy, so Antal went to the Navy enlistment office. After trying to impress Antal with the standard talk about the benefits of service, the recruiter came to the part about a four-year commitment. Antal had just finished four years of high school and wasn't about to commit to anything else for four years. He walked out of the Navy office and went around the corner to the Marine Corps recruiter, who offered to take Antal for three years. "Take me," he said.

Likewise, Ed Krisko of Detroit had no plans to become a Marine. His more urgent goal was trying to get a '55 Chevrolet on the road. He and four of his friends tried to get the car running, but they failed time after time. After making one final set of repairs, they tried to start the car again. Nothing happened. Frustrated, they decided right then to go down to the Marine Corps recruiting office and join up. They chose the Marines over the other branches of service because the Marine recruiting office was closest.

Making the decision to enlist and choosing a branch of the service was sometimes the easy part – the hard part was for the young men to tell their families about their decision. Upon hearing of their enlistments, their parents reacted with a range of emotions, from pride to dread to downright anger.

"My dad was thrilled to death that I had joined because I was the first Marine in the family since my grandfather," says Mike Robinson. "My mother was scared to death that I would go to Vietnam. She was also very proud, but you know how mothers are."

Scott Camil's family was proud. "There was not one voice of dissent. Everyone thought that it was good for me to go into the service and good for me to go into the Marines."

When Stan Blessing's mother heard of her son's decision, she broke down in tears. "Please, dear God, keep him safe," she prayed, "I don't think we could survive without him."

John Lee's family in Cottage Grove, Oregon, was proud of his decision, but they also feared he would be sent to Vietnam. Rod Lewis' family was also not thrilled that he had enlisted during wartime. Phil Seymour's family wasn't too concerned because the war seemed like it would be short-lived. "I don't think anybody thought the Vietnam War was going to last as long as it did or take as many lives as it did," he says. George Boze's mother and sister were proud of his decision, but his father didn't seem to care.

After his 17th birthday, George Dougherty sat his parents down in their Brooklyn home and told them that he wanted to join the Marine Corps. His mother was devastated. Her three brothers had been killed in World War II, and she feared for her son's life.

Gerald Brothers was also short of his 18th birthday when he decided to enlist. After his mother's death, Brothers was raised by his sister Pauline and her husband. He came to them and said, "Three of my friends and I would like to join the Marines." His guardians protested, saying they wanted him to go to college. The last place they wanted him to go was into the Marine Corps in the middle of a war. His sister begged him to reconsider and refused to sign the paperwork required for underage recruits, but Brothers got a judge to grant him permission to join without their consent.

Seventeen-year-old Steve Kane also needed his mother's

permission to join. She didn't want to sign the papers, but when he said he was just going to enlist when he turned 18 anyway, she gave in.

Boot Camp

The lives of these young men were beginning to converge from towns across the country into one of the Marine Corps' two recruit depots. Recruits who lived east of the Mississippi River attended boot camp at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) on Parris Island, South Carolina. Those who lived west of the river attended MCRD in San Diego and were sometimes called "Hollywood Marines" by those who had been trained at Parris Island.

The tough reputation of boot camp is part of the Corps' mystique. Many men fail to finish the training and earn the title "Marine." A young recruit's first taste of the Marine Corps is a profound moment. Most remember a bus ride, yellow footprints, shock, fear, and one scary individual: the drill instructor (DI).

Ed Yates left his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, by train and arrived at Parris Island, South Carolina, on a bus in the middle of the night. Most of the recruits were asleep. Suddenly, a Marine drill instructor boarded the bus and shouted, "You 13 God-damned bastards get off this bus and I mean right fuckin' now!" Yates was shocked at the DI's language because there were women and children on the bus. The DI repeated even louder: "I said for you 13 God-damned mother-fuckers to get off this bus and line up on those yellow footprints. GET OFF!" The recruits scattered. They lined up on a bunch of yellow footprints on the pavement next to the bus.

George Hutchings had joined the Marines to be tough, but he quickly discovered how tough Marines really were. As he got off an orange school bus at MCRD in San Diego, a DI grabbed him by the shirt and lifted him off the ground. "I'm your momma!" shouted the DI. "Stand on the yellow feet!"

Dan Snell traveled from his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina, to Parris Island on the night of 26 July 1966. Like thousands of Marines before him, he was ordered off the bus and told to stand on the yellow footprints. Like thousands of Marines before him, he stood listening to the screams of the DIs wondering if he had made the biggest mistake of his life.

The change from civilian to recruit was immediate. The men were

stripped of their civilian clothes – they could donate them to charity or have them mailed back home. They were issued standard military clothing and had their heads shaved. “After the haircut, I hardly recognized my buddy,” Snell remembers. “I could hardly recognize myself in the mirror. It was all a little more intense than I expected.”

Like Mark Anderson, Mike Cole joined with a friend under the buddy plan. The two recruits got on a bus bound for Parris Island and arrived at about two in the morning. They were told to stand in three lines on the infamous yellow footprints. The DI asked, “Are there any questions?” A recruit raised his hand. The DI punched him in the stomach. As the recruit doubled over, the DI asked, “Are there any more questions?” There weren’t. After they walked away from the bus, Cole wouldn’t see his friend again for two years.

Two other buddies, Perkins and Priddy, were on a bus with other new “Hollywood Marine” recruits. A drill instructor got on the bus and screamed, “Last person off this bus, I’m gonna kick his ass!” Perkins and Priddy scrambled from the bus then watched in horror as three DIs roughed up the last recruit off the bus. Perkins and Priddy looked at each other, wide-eyed, and thought, *Whoa, we might have screwed up here.*

The first day was the beginning of a harsh training regimen. Even though Yates came from a Marine Corps family, boot camp was a total culture shock for him. “In a very short time, they strip you of everything. They strip you down to nothing,” he says. “Then they build you back up, the Marine Corps way.” He realized the rigors were intended for an important final result: “Some recruits have no self confidence, but when they leave Parris Island, they have all the confidence in the world.” He says boot camp teaches discipline, obedience, and pride in the Corps and the country.

In boot camp, recruits are told not to have their family send certain items. Yates received a package from his father full of banned goods: cigarettes, candy and chewing gum. Yates was called into the DI’s office. The DI said, “Your father is a Marine and you turned out like this, a piece of crap!” Yates was forced to eat everything in one sitting, including two packs of Camel cigarettes. It wasn’t long before he was throwing up.

Snell admits that when he entered boot camp, he was still a kid, even though he and the other teenaged recruits thought of themselves as grown-ups. It was the Marine Corps’ job to transform

young men into warriors. “Who is the Marine Corps’ greatest enemy?” one of Snell’s drill instructors would shout.

“Mothers!” was the correct answer. “Mothers made you the pathetic bunch of weenie little maggots that you are,” the DI would scream.

At the time, Snell thought the statement was bizarre, but he later came to find some truth in it: “Moms don’t make Marines. When you think about a Marine’s job, most of us were weenie little maggots. We didn’t want to admit it, but we didn’t really accept responsibility for our own actions. Part of being a warrior is accepting that personal responsibility.”

Snell hated boot camp. “It was just a total culture shock. But compared to real combat, Parris Island was not bad. We were all very naïve. There is no way to fully prepare for real combat.”

Across the country, boot camp in San Diego was a physical challenge for David Welsh. At six feet tall, he weighed about 220. He was told that if he didn’t pass the physical fitness test, he would be sent to the “fat man’s platoon” – the Physical Conditioning Platoon of the Special Training Branch. He didn’t want to be assigned to the fat man’s platoon, so he had to lose 45 pounds.

In his first physical fitness test, Welsh could barely do one pull- up, a few sit-ups, and five-to-six pushups. He was in bad shape, but he wanted to be a Marine. He had ten weeks rather than the standard thirteen weeks to get in shape. Marines were needed for Vietnam, so the standard thirteen-week boot camp had been shortened to ten.

Like other platoons, Welsh’s platoon was pushed right off the bat. The men woke up at 5 a.m., ate breakfast, and returned to their barracks for inspection. Then they had PT, or physical training. After PT, they marched to classrooms where they were taught Marine Corps history and traditions, the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the Code of Conduct. They were taught the nomenclature, disassembly, assembly, care and cleaning of their rifles. They marched every day.

Soon they hit the obstacle course, which was a challenge for Welsh, but the DIs pushed him far beyond what he thought his limits were. At the end of the nine weeks, Welsh and his fellow recruits had to pass a written test, a small arms exam, and the physical fitness test, which included completion of the entire obstacle course. Welsh passed every test. His weight had dropped from 220 to 165. He went from one pull-up to fifteen and from one or two pushups to fifty.

Now he could be a Marine.

Denver, Colorado, native Stan Blessing learned in boot camp that Marines had to help each other out. He had been blessed with good running ability, something that came in handy on the many treks the Marines were forced to make. One day another recruit had a sick stomach going into the day's run. He started to lag behind. Blessing and another Marine teamed up to save the man from the wrath of the DI, yelling, "Keep on going! Don't stop!"

Helping other people helped Blessing get through boot camp. The son of a minister, he was a devout Christian who sang in the church choir. He loved the Lord. He loved his mother. He also loved a good joke. He would often relieve the stress of his fellow recruits with some levity: he would imitate the DIs or make faces at them when they weren't looking. The other men would snicker, but when the drill instructors turned around to find the culprit, nobody would point a finger at Blessing.

Like many recruits, Blessing was homesick. He wrote home often, longing to see his family, dog and girlfriend. The girlfriend, however, sent Stan a "Dear John" letter while he was in boot camp. The young recruit was devastated. He almost washed out but, with the help of a caring drill instructor, made it through.

For Scott Camil, boot camp was a hard way to learn simple lessons. "You learn pretty quickly that you can push yourself much further than you think that you can. People think that they have certain limits. But when you are pushed, you can surpass those limits pretty far." Although he says the Parris Island experience was very traumatic – even abusive – the training kept him alive and had other benefits. "It made me a better person," he says. "It gave me discipline. I would not be the person that I am today had it not been for that rigorous, sometimes brutal training."

The smallest mistake by a recruit could earn punishment for his entire platoon. For instance, Kevin Cahill, a good-looking Irish teen with dark hair, had trouble keeping in step while marching. As a result, on more than one occasion, his entire platoon was forced to do 200 push-ups because of his mistake. This was to reinforce the idea that in combat, a minor infraction by one person might cost the lives of many.

"You are a team," Camil says. "You are not an individual. If you do something stupid, the rest of the men are going to get killed. If you

step on a mine, everybody around you is going to get blown up. If you are trying to conceal yourselves while a superior force is walking by you, and one of your guys slaps a mosquito, everybody is screwed."

The rigors of recruit training washed out some recruits and mentally broke others. Mark Anderson's friend, who had encouraged him to join under the buddy plan, went AWOL (Absent Without Leave) at MCRD San Diego. When he was found, the man was sent to a mental hospital. He eventually died addicted to heroin.

"The military is not an American thing," he says. "We are so free, laid-back, and don't have much discipline. In boot camp, all of the sudden, you're not free. It's not laid-back and it's big-time discipline. A lot of people just can't handle it. Fortunately, for me, I went to Catholic schools, which taught me discipline. It was perfect preparation for the Marine Corps."

Anderson handled the physical challenge of MCRD San Diego because he played sports in high school. The mental challenge, however, was another matter. He recalls one particularly nerve-wracking episode. The men had to practice folding their clothing items and displaying them along with their individual equipment on their rack, a routine called "junk on the bunk." Anderson folded a shirt incorrectly, but the mistake was minor. The DI came in, looked at the shirt, and punched Anderson in the face, knocking him to the floor. The DI screamed, "This guy is going to kill his buddies in the Nam! He doesn't follow fucking orders!'"

R.J. Jackson likens the boot camp process to sculpting – "Get that hunk of clay, you beat it, you thump it, you knead it, and then, all of a sudden, it starts taking shape, and that's what we did." He said it was evident that the Marines were being sculpted into confident, competent fighters.

George Dougherty endured weeks of being called "Dumb Dougherty" by his DI after an incident on his third day of boot camp. The 17-year-old had been issued his rifle and bayonet, and had been told not to touch anything until he had been properly trained. That night he was on fire watch duty, which meant he would rouse the sleeping recruits in case of a fire. His shift started at 2 a.m. Bored, he started examining the weapons strapped to his bunk. He had never touched a gun in his life, so he picked up the rifle in the dark, took his bayonet out of its scabbard, and attached it to the rifle. Realizing he would be in trouble if the DI saw the bayonet affixed to the rifle,

he tried to remove it but couldn't figure out how. He put the rifle between his knees and accidentally hit the button that released the bayonet. The bayonet ejected upward and ripped through his nose.

Blood poured down his face and into his throat. Choking on his own blood, he thought he would bleed to death, but death seemed almost easier than facing his DI. Finally he got the courage to knock on the DI's door. The DI screamed, "Private Dougherty, it better be important." He opened the door to see the recruit standing there, covered in blood. Dougherty got three stitches in the nose and a new nickname: Dumb Dougherty.

The drill instructors were tough, tireless, and demanding, but there was a method to their madness. They molded their recruits into men who would unquestionably follow orders. "It's a psychological game, and those DIs are really good at it," Anderson says. "They made us into good troops. Otherwise, we never would have made it through Medina."

The rationale behind a recruit's training in boot camp is to instill a level of discipline and esprit that will ultimately ensure successful

accomplishment of whatever combat objective is assigned. "If the guys were individualists and didn't fight for their brother Marines, they would just go off and do their own thing. They would run off, and then we would all be screwed," Anderson says.

The challenges endured in boot camp changed each man, changes that were essential for survival in combat. The main lesson was self-discipline. Each Marine had to be a reliable piece of a much larger puzzle. These men were being trained to go to war. In combat, there would be no time for a Marine to debate whether to fire a rifle or retreat. The reactions had to be instinctive, and the Marines had to trust themselves.

So the DIs were harsh, shrill, demanding. Some of the men hated them. But most of the men eventually saw the importance of the lessons. Scott Thorne remembers his harsh drillmasters with gratitude. "If I would have seen any of those three guys in Vietnam or after, or right now, today, I'd throw them down on the floor and french kiss 'em," he says. "They saved my life."

Yes, he admits, they were harsh. "You didn't blink unless they told you to blink," he says. But he says the harsh treatment was invaluable when he got to Vietnam.

Though most of the young men had a rude awakening when they

stepped on those infamous yellow footprints, some did not consider recruit training to be that bad. “Boot camp was a joke,” Boze recalls. “I was getting paid $120 a month to have folks slap me around. At home, it was free. Nobody enjoys boot camp, but I made the best out of it. It was the best learning experience I ever had, including going to college.”

Boot camp should have seemed like a different world for John Lee, whose life in Oregon consisted of salmon fishing in the ocean and cruising the town in his ’56 Plymouth Savoy. But he didn’t see it as a big adjustment. “If you think this drill instructor’s tough, you hould see my dad,” he told his fellow recruits. Target practice at Camp Pendleton was no problem for him. He was already a good shot, a skill he developed through years of deer hunting.

For Dennis Antal, boot camp was rough, but overall not that bad. It was the first time he’d been away from home, so to him it was a big adventure. Steve Kane was shocked by the rough boot camp schedule and atmosphere at first, but by the time it was over he came to like the routine.

For Ed Krisko, the emotional stress of boot camp was compounded by tragic news from home: his father had died. Krisko was granted 10 days of emergency leave before having to return to the rigors of recruit training.

OCS

One of the ways to obtain a commission in the Marine Corps is through the OCS (Officer Candidates School) program at Quantico, Virginia. After Bill Major graduated from Davis and Elkins College in West Virginia, the future commander of Charlie Company went to Quantico. Most officer candidates were college graduates and older than the average recruit. But they underwent training similar to that endured in boot camp.

OCS at Quantico lasted for twelve weeks. An officer candidate woke up to the shouting and screaming of a sergeant instructor. He spent his time learning how to clean and use his rifle. He participated in close order drill and physical training. He was taught basic Marine Corps history and tactics. He then had more drill, conditioning hikes, and physical training including the obstacle course, the confidence course, and the speed reaction course.

The candidates had to demonstrate that they had the potential to

be officers. For example, candidates were given the opportunity to be in charge for a day, playing the role of squad leaders or platoon leaders, marching troops through a schedule. But the stress of newfound leadership was not the only thing the officer candidates had to contend with. Sergeant instructors would run alongside the candidates, screaming in their faces with every misstep.

OCS was a weeding-out process. “They push you physically to see if they can break you and to see if you have the physical and mental stamina to be a Marine officer,” Major says. “I saw many drop out. Even though they were college graduates, I guess that some of them weren’t mentally or psychologically prepared for the military. They were not built to follow orders and to lead Marines.”

Many officer candidates who entered OCS with Paul Nelson didn’t last. In his group, only 500 of the 800 handpicked candidates finished the program.

Robert Anderson graduated from Yale University in 1966 and had a decision to make: continue on to graduate school or enlist in the military. He didn’t have any peer pressure affecting his decision; there wasn’t much anti-war activity on the Yale campus at that time. He did feel a bit of societal pressure, though. “To a certain extent, young men in this country were raised on the idea of warfare being a passage to manhood,” he explains. Also, he simply didn’t want to go to graduate school. So, like many of the men in his graduating class, he chose the military.

He immediately regretted his decision. The first day of OCS, as he stood in a line of other candidates with his head shaved and his ears ringing with the screams of sergeant instructors, he thought, *What the hell am I doing here?*

He soon realized the method to the Marine madness. Every Marine was trained to be an infantryman first. “In the Marine Corps the idea is that when the shit hits the fan, every Marine, no matter what they’re working as, can pick up that rifle, and you know this training is going to come back to them,” he says.

Not all officers in the Marine Corps obtained their commission by attending OCS after graduating from college. A non-commissioned officer who exhibited the intelligence and leadership ability to become a Marine officer could be pulled from the ranks. These officers are sometimes referred to as “mustangs.” Jack Ruffer was a mustang.

Ruffer enlisted in the Marine Corps on 28 August 1959. Standing 5'10" with brown hair, square shoulders and a thin waist, he went to boot camp in San Diego and then was assigned to Company B, First Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment, First Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, California. At Bravo 1/7, he served under Captain Donald R. Austgen, a mustang, a Korean War veteran, and one of the finest officers he would ever serve under. "I think every Marine in the company worshipped the ground Captain Austgen walked on," Ruffer says. "He was a magnificent leader."

Ruffer went into what was called "lock-on" training, where Marines learn to act and think like a team from fireteam level (four men) up to battalion level (1,100 men). Offensive and defensive tactics conducted day and night characterized the training cycle.

Ruffer's battalion was then assigned to relieve another battalion on the island of Okinawa, Japan, where he enrolled in the University of Maryland Overseas Extension Program and took college courses.

Within 20 months, he had progressed from weapons gunner to squad leader and then to section leader. In a year and a half, he went from being a private to a corporal with the responsibility for 21 other Marines. At the end of his first enlistment, Ruffer was already a sergeant.

After completing a rigorous application process, Ruffer was one of only 20 NCOs (non-commissioned officers) selected to attend OCS. He had only ten days to move his family from Tustin, California, to San Bernardino, California, and then get himself to Quantico. He began OCS on 15 March 1965.

Graduation

Graduation from boot camp or OCS is a watershed moment in the life of every Marine. From that point on, he or she becomes a member of a proud family, a membership that had to be earned. Many of the recruits wash out before graduation. Only the strongest would be called Marines.

Boze says he'll never forget the day he finally got to wear the Marine eagle, globe, and anchor. "It was the culmination of all that sweat and blood." Boze and the others entered the ranks of a select group of Americans. "There was nothing finer that day than being able to be called a Marine," he says. "No matter where or when you meet another Marine, it doesn't matter if they were in WWII, Korea,

Vietnam, or Lebanon, you are brothers."

After becoming a Marine himself, Phil Hartranft began to hold every Marine in awe. "I know what they went through. If you were with five Marines, it's the most secure feeling in the world. I know that any of those Marines, if I would be in a jam, would come help me. I honestly couldn't say that about five of my friends. It's something that's instilled in you in recruit training and it stays with you."

On his graduation day in December of 1966, Kane was proud of the strength he had acquired. *I'll never be in better shape than I am today,* he thought.

A generation earlier, Mike Cole's father earned the eagle, globe, and anchor at Parris Island. He later served in WWII. Now, in 1967, he was there to see his son become a Marine. Gone were most of the drafty wooden barracks he had endured in his boot camp days. But the traditions remained.

Cole's drill instructors chose him to be the guidon bearer for his platoon. The guidon is a small banner that identifies the platoon by number. He knew his younger brothers attending the ceremony didn't understand the significance of his role but that his father would. Cole wasn't a boy anymore. He was a man.

On the other hand, graduation was a reminder to Krisko that his father was gone. "I wish he would have been there to see me," he says. "He'd have been proud."

Boot camp also further defined Stan Blessing. He had always been protective of his sister Kelly, but the Marines gave him further confidence. When Kelly attended his graduation ceremony, she lit up a cigarette. Her brother grabbed the cigarette, broke it, and said, "No, you are not smoking."

Scott Thorne remembers that the Marines, fresh from boot camp, would indulge themselves. After the graduation ceremony, many of the new Marines rushed out to get Coca-Cola, ice cream, hot dogs, hamburgers, and other foods they'd been denied through boot camp.

R.J. Jackson and his fellow graduates were allowed to eat with their guests at graduation. One of his friends sampled the food and said, "Do you have to eat this crap every day?"

"This is like filet mignon to me," Jackson replied.

Snell felt a great sense of accomplishment when he completed boot camp, but he was definitely not nostalgic about the experience: "One

of the prettiest things I ever saw were the Greyhound buses coming on base to take us off Parris Island," he says. "Seeing that bus in the twilight, idling, was a beautiful sight. I knew that I was going to get on that bus and leave. The second prettiest thing I ever saw was the backside of the front gate of Parris Island as we drove out."

The buses were also symbolic for Seymour: "I got on the bus, and it was almost like a birthing experience. I felt almost reborn. I was as proud as I could be to have made it through boot camp." As the buses drove away, he felt his life change. "It was almost like, not being freed from prison, but the beginning of a new life."

The buses took the new Marines away from the most challenging experience of their young lives. But they would find that their challenges were only just beginning.

William T. Perkins, Jr. (left) and Jim Priddy upon graduation from boot camp, MCRD San Diego, 1966.

Those who earned the title “Marine,” whether they had survived boot camp or OCS, still had much to learn. The Corps had to train Marines to function at all levels: as a fireteam, squad, platoon, company, battalion, regiment and division. The Corps had to train them on mortars, rockets, and machine guns. The Corps had to train them to assume leadership. For officers, this training came at The Basic School (TBS). The enlisted men went to Infantry Training Regiment (ITR).

Bill Major’s wife and parents pinned on his collar the bars of a second lieutenant on the day he graduated from OCS, “but I was no more a Marine officer than anyone else walking down the street,” he says. On that day, Major felt great accomplishment and pride. But he didn’t have much time to savor those feelings – he was immediately put on a bus for TBS. He had six months to learn how to become a Marine Corps officer.

Every Marine with a commission learned to be an infantry platoon commander first. Jack Ruffer remembers that TBS covered every conceivable situation that a commander and his unit might find themselves in: Platoon in the attack day or night, platoon in the defense day or night, frontal assaults, envelopments, traveling on foot with or without armor support, use of supporting arms (artillery and close air support), reconnaissance patrolling, combat patrolling, use of observation posts and listening posts, and more. “We had a full spectrum of tactics at the platoon level and worked with every supporting arm in the inventory,” he recalls. While at TBS, Ruffer earned the Major General Merritt A. Edson Marksmanship Trophy for the highest combined score for pistol and rifle marksmanship among the 300 officers in his class.

The candidates were taught to function as platoon commanders under the most stressful of all circumstances: combat. TBS emphasized a specific type of leadership. “To be an officer in the Marine Corps, you must learn to lead by personal example,” Major says. “You must do what you would expect your men to do, and you must do it out in front rather than sitting back in an office telling people what to do.”

“They told us that we would have to be the first to go into a bad situation,” Paul Nelson says. “You can’t be pushing people out there.”

Nelson carried this lesson with him in combat: “When I got to Vietnam, as we moved, I usually made myself the fourth man in the column out of 35 or 40 guys. Normally, I would have a point man, a cover man, the squad leader and then me. The radioman would be behind me. I never thought that I could be back in the middle or last squad. I had to be in the lead squad. It was instilled in the training that you had to be up front setting the example.”

Ruffer says this approach was not the typical “do as I say leadership,” but “do as I do” leadership.

Every student in TBS was rotated through leadership positions. The leader’s first responsibility was to accomplish the group’s mission. The second was to see to the welfare of his men. The students were taught map reading, Marine Corps history, how to call in air strikes and artillery, the function of different weapons, and military communications.

“They emphasized setting a high standard and meeting it, being consistent and always setting the example,” Ruffer recalls. Since he was a mustang, Ruffer had already seen a lot of the Marine Corps by the time he entered The Basic School. He had been through recruit boot camp, ITR, and OCS. He had seen good and bad leaders. So he patterned himself after the good officers he had served under.

For Paul Nelson and Robert Anderson, the instructors at TBS had been platoon and company commanders in Vietnam. Students were given numerous combat case studies to work out together in class. They came up with a solution to the problem, and the instructors critiqued the solution based on their combat experience. There weren’t always simple answers. “The instructors at The Basic School were very good at helping you make estimates of situations and think on your feet,” Nelson says. “The Basic School taught a young officer how to pull himself together and solve military problems.”

The Basic School lasted six months. Upon graduation, a second lieutenant knew the basics of being an infantry officer. At the time, the Corps’ greatest need was for infantry officers, so that was the assignment Bill Major received.

“I was very happy,” he recalls. “I loved the outdoors. I still do a lot of hunting and fishing, and I used to do a lot of camping. Being an infantry officer and spending a lot of time outdoors fit right into my big scheme. I thought that this was great. The Marine Corps was paying me to do what I liked to do.”

Ruffer, Nelson, and Anderson received the same assignments when they completed their training.

ITR

After boot camp, the enlisted Marines attended Infantry Training Regiment (ITR), which prepared them for the field of combat. Those Marines who graduated from Parris Island attended ITR at Camp Geiger, which is part of the Camp Lejeune complex located near Jacksonville, North Carolina. Those Marines who graduated from MCRD San Diego went to Camp San Onofre, at the northern end of Camp Pendleton, near San Clemente, California.

All Marines were trained as riflemen first. They were taught infantry tactics: How to work together as an infantry unit. How to shoot a pistol and a rifle on a combat range. How to fight with a knife. How to defend themselves without weapons. How to carry a wounded comrade. How to cross a river with a rope. There were many training sessions and forced marches.

"What you are really taught is that when you are given a job to do, you think: 'What are the steps that I need to do to accomplish this job?'" Scott Camil says. "You do those steps in order, and you accomplish the mission."

The Marines were taught how to throw grenades and how to shoot an M79 grenade launcher. They were drilled in a variety of combat scenarios. For example, the men would have to take apart and reassemble their rifles and handguns while blindfolded in order to prepare for weapon malfunctions during night combat.

Mike Robinson went to ITR at Camp Pendleton, where he encountered Marines who had already been to Vietnam. "You got an idea of what you were in for," he says. "Everybody had their own stories." Even though the stories were all different, the veterans had one thing in common: "I haven't found a combat Marine yet that said he wasn't afraid," Robinson says.

In addition to training as a rifleman, some Marines were given training in a specialty. While at boot camp, the recruits were given aptitude tests. Based on the results of those tests, the Marines were assigned an MOS (Military Occupational Specialty). Each Marine had a specific role to play in the Corps, and the needs of the Corps always came first. A Marine had little choice with regard to his assignment. He was a cog in the Marine machine. Most Marines

became infantrymen or grunts. The MOS for a grunt rifleman is 0311.

At Camp Geiger, Joe Zorn and Dan Snell were each assigned an MOS of 0351: anti-tank assault man. They were trained on the 106mm recoilless rifle, 3.5-inch rocket launcher, the flamethrower and in demolitions. Because they were trained on these additional weapons, they spent more time at ITR than the average rifleman: eight weeks instead of four to six.

Mark Anderson just wanted to be a rifleman. He didn't like school, and he signed up for the Marines hoping that his school days would be over. He volunteered to be a grunt so he would have a shorter training period. But when the DI called his name on the last day of boot camp, Anderson didn't hear "0311." He heard "2500." An MOS of 2500 was communications. Anderson was going to become a field radio operator.

Steve Kane was also assigned to communications. The men training in communications quickly realized that the assignment was ominous. They were told that the radio antennae sticking into the air made them targets. The enemy knew that if they took out the radio operator, the rest of the men were easy targets. Without the radio, they would be cut off from assistance from air support, artillery support, and mortars.

"Field radio operators were falling in droves in Nam," Anderson recalls. "They told us that the life expectancy was about two weeks."

At Camp Pendleton, George Boze was assigned an MOS of 0341: mortars. (Medium mortars were 81mm. Their smaller cousins were 60mm mortars). "If you did well in mechanics, you could fire a weapon well, and if your trigonometry was up to snuff, you went into mortars," Boze recalls. "It is a very demanding job to get that mortar set just perfectly so those rounds would drop exactly where they were supposed to." If the calculations were one micrometer off, the explosives would miss their targets.

Phil Seymour was originally assigned an MOS of 0311. But, the needs of the Corps came first and, at the time, the Corps needed men in mortars. Seymour's MOS was changed from 0311 to 0341.

The Marines at mortar school took extensive classes on the weapon and learned to handle the packages of pre-measured black powder and plastic explosives. The school lasted four to six weeks – not long enough to become proficient with the weapon, but enough to know the basics of using it in combat. "The training wasn't very adequate,"

Boze says. “I wasn’t proficient enough to be a gunner, but if everyone in the gun pit was killed except me, I knew how to set that weapon up.”

In Vietnam, the 81mm mortar men were usually not taken out on platoon-sized patrols because of the size of the weaponry. With its basic issue items, the 81mm weighed 121.5 pounds. The parts of an 81mm mortar had to be carried by several men because of the weight of the weapon. The smaller 60mm mortars accompanied a platoon or company for close support.

On a large operation, a Marine in mortars might carry an M16 rifle, eight magazines of ammunition, two canteens of water, a flak jacket, helmet, first aid packet, back pack and the heavy base plate. “You were humping 150 pounds at least,” Boze says. “When I got married to my first fat woman, it was no problem picking her up.”

Camil was assigned to the Fire Direction Center (FDC). An FDC works with a forward observer (FO). The FO accompanies the infantry in the field. If artillery is needed to support Marines in combat, the FO’s job is to spot the enemy’s position, locate that position on a map, and radio those coordinates to the FDC. The FDC plots the enemy position on a map. The FDC then figures out the range and the direction, called azimuth or deflection, from the artillery to the target and determines the amount of powder it would take to deliver the artillery rounds to that position, taking into account direction and strength of the wind. This information is relayed to the artillery gunners in the pit, and the first round of shells are fired. The FO, who is with the infantry, then radios back adjustments after the first rounds are fired. When the shells are landing on target, the FO says, “Fire for effect.”

Mike Cole’s MOS was tracked vehicle repair. He was sent to the auto school at Camp Geiger, where he learned to repair the big diesel engines in amtracs and tanks. Not surprisingly, Edward Krisko, who had given up on fixing his ’55 Chevy, was not given a vehicle repair MOS. He was a grunt.

While in boot camp, Rod Lewis found out that his girlfriend was pregnant. He was able to go home on leave at Christmas to get married, and then he went to Camp Pendleton for ITR. At ITR, a man came through Lewis’ barracks and asked if there was anyone who had qualified as an expert on the rifle range. Lewis had, in fact, qualified as an expert with the M14 at boot camp. He had hunted all

of his life and knew how to shoot a rifle. These skills decided the direction he would take in the military. The man who came through the barracks was from the sniper school.

Similarly, R.J. Jackson was near the end of his infantry training when an unfamiliar officer came in and asked if anyone had qualified as an expert on the rifle range, meaning at least a score of 220. Jackson and many others raised their hands.

"Who shot better than 225?" the officer asked. Fewer hands went up, but Jackson still qualified.

"Who shot better than 230?"

Jackson and about 10 others raised their hands.

"All right, the rest of you men can leave," the officer said.

Jackson got the uneasy feeling that he had just volunteered for something. He had been assigned an MOS of 0311 and had been training in reconnaissance skills which involved venturing out in camouflage looking for the enemy's force and drawing maps to help his officers make tactical decisions.

After the other Marines left, the officers explained to the small group that the Corps had re-instituted the Scout/Sniper Program and was looking for volunteers to undergo grueling training for the new sniper program in Vietnam.

One of the Marines raised his hand. "What's the life expectancy for a sniper compared to recon?"

The officers paused. "Well," one of them said, "we haven't had that many snipers, but probably about the same."

The officers laughed, but the other Marines weren't impressed. Another officer, seeing their reaction, added, "But there's some good news. There's an extra three weeks of training, so you'll get to stay in the States three weeks longer."

Jackson and the other Marines all volunteered.

The first part of sniper school involved classroom lessons about the rifle they would use. Then the men would go out and shoot. The instructors taught the new Marines how to shoot in a variety of situations: at long distances, short distances, at moving targets, in heavy winds. The men learned to estimate how shifting winds would affect the trajectory of a bullet, which might change direction slightly two or three times on the way to its target. It took a lot of practice for the men to master the skills.

Jackson developed blisters on his lip from being out on the rifle

range in the sun all day with his cap turned backward so he could shoot. His shoulder became black and blue from firing his rifle so many times.

In April of 1967, while Lewis was enrolled in the sniper school, his new wife came down to visit him. She stayed in a hotel near Camp Pendleton. Late one night, after completing some night training, he received a telephone call from the base hospital. His daughter had been born.

Lewis' sergeant gave him leave to visit his wife and new daughter. He hitchhiked all the way to the hospital. After she was released, the new mother and baby returned to the small hotel room. Since they didn't have a car, the couple had to walk to the PX for diapers and bottles. It wasn't long before Lewis' wife and child were on a plane back to Portland. Lewis knew he was going to miss the first year of his daughter's life, but he was secretly glad that the military was taking him away for a few months. He felt more prepared for military life than he did for married life.

Since he was in the Navy, Wayne Dowd did not attend Marine Corps boot camp. He went to Great Lakes, Illinois, for Navy recruit training and Hospital Corps School. In Hospital Corps School, Dowd was taught intensive first aid, basic medical care, and hospital procedures like how to change a bed, how to give a shot, and how to change bandages. He took some pharmacology courses to learn how to administer simple medicines. Overall, he was taught how to work and function in a hospital environment.

After Hospital Corps School, Dowd was sent to Long Beach Naval Hospital in California. At the time, Navy corpsmen were being selected for Field Medical School. Upon completion of that four-week program, the corpsmen would be assigned to the Marine Corps. Dowd applied for Field Medical School as soon as he could. He looked forward to going to Vietnam: "It was a challenge to see if I could handle the baptism of fire," he says. "The excitement, the danger, the risk, the adventure all appealed to me."

Kermit "Doc" Hammergren underwent similar Navy recruit training, but unlike Dowd, he initially didn't expect to learn about medicines and battle dressings. Hammergren had his heart set on aviation. He took all the tests given to recruits and eagerly listened when a recruiting officer asked, "Why don't you become a corpsman?" Hammergren was just 17, a young country boy who took

everything at face value. “What’s a corpsman?” he asked innocently. The recruiter said, “Well, corpsmen fly.”

That’s good enough for me, he thought. When he graduated from Navy recruit training in San Diego, he got orders to the hospital corps at Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego. He was stunned when he realized the nature of his assignment. He thought he was going to get to fly, but, after the initial shock wore off, he quickly adapted to his new assignment and never looked back.

George Dougherty stood patiently while the MOS assignments were given out. Riflemen were announced. He wasn’t one of them. Machine gunners and rocket men were listed. He wasn’t one of them.

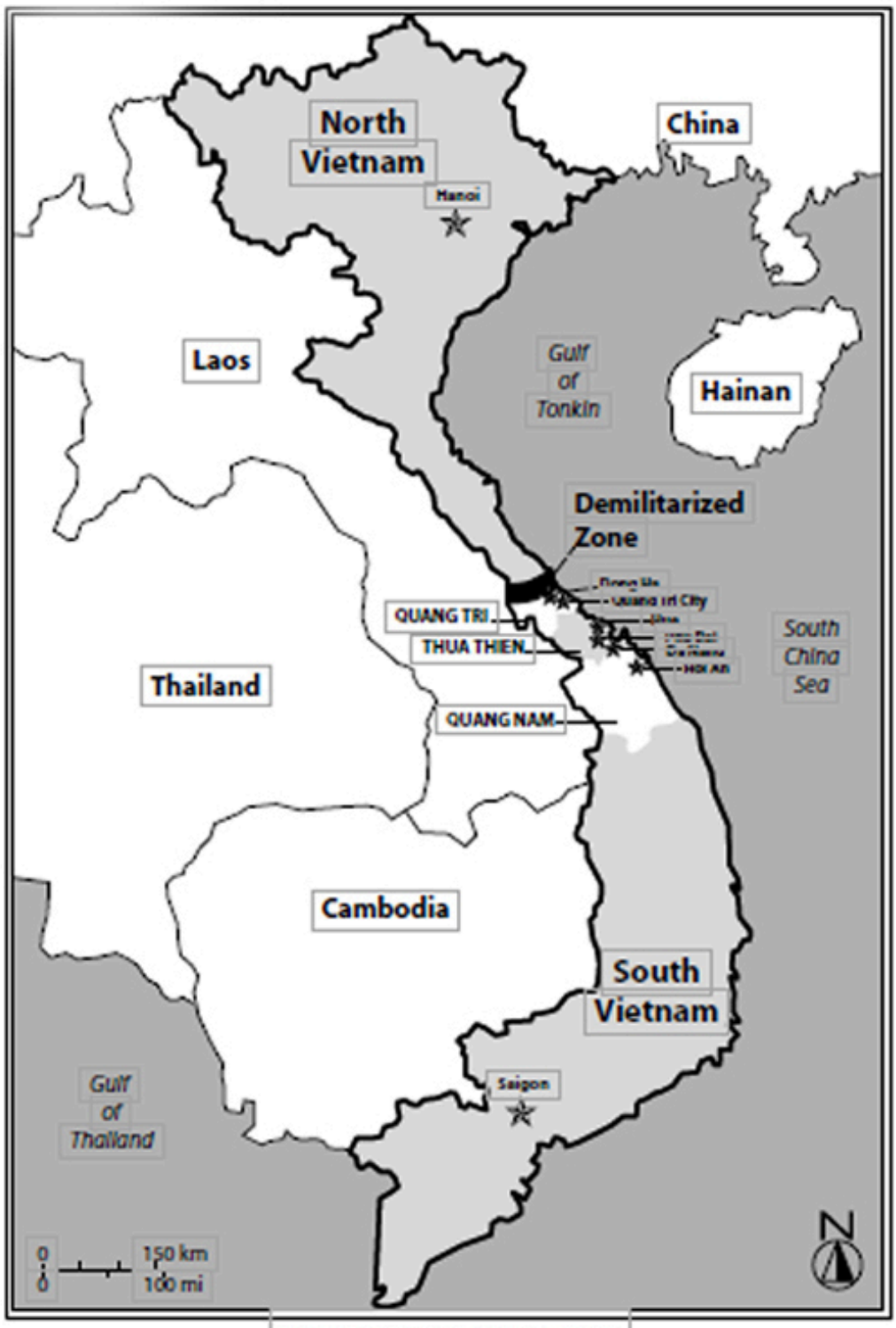
“Dougherty,” he was finally told. “You’re an 1121.”

“What the hell’s an 1121?” he asked. “A plumber.”

Dougherty didn’t want to be a plumber. He didn’t stop to think that as a plumber he would likely be stationed on a military base out of harm’s way. “I was 17 and stupid,” he says now. But back then he wanted some action.

“Is there any way out of this?” he asked. He refused to be persuaded that the Marines needed plumbers, and finally his superiors agreed to make him a grunt.

At the end of The Basic School or Infantry Training Regiment, the new Marines knew the role they were going to play in the Corps. Upon completion of Field Medical School, the Navy corpsmen knew that they would accompany Marines in the field. Most were ready, eager and apprehensive about the next step: combat far from home in an exotic sounding place called Vietnam.



Greater Southeast Asia, 1967

3 The Other Side of the World

The war in Southeast Asia was heating up in 1966. Vietnam had splintered into two parts while fighting for independence from France in the 1940s and 50s. Now the communist north was determined to reunite the country under its rule. America's commitment to save South Vietnam from communism was growing each day. U.S. troops poured in to shore up South Vietnamese soldiers. The combined American and South Vietnamese forces fought the North Vietnamese Army and their counterparts in the south, the Viet Cong.

In 1966 and early 1967, most Americans considered the war to be justified. Stemming the tide of communist aggression throughout the world was a matter of vital national interest. For the most part, the young men who joined the Marine Corps agreed. Most wanted to serve in Vietnam, or at least resigned themselves to the fact that they would end up in the war sooner or later. But, just as their reasons for enlistment varied, their reasons for wanting to fight varied as well.

Phil Hartranft considered it his duty to serve: "I wanted to go to Vietnam. It sounds corny, but that's what they paid you for, why they put the stripes on your sleeve and the rifle in your hand. It was my turn to go, so I went."

Scott Camil wanted to go to Vietnam and fight the communists before troops had to fight on American soil. Jack Ruffer believed the "domino theory," the idea that if one nation fell to communism, others would likewise fall.

Paul Nelson knew that if he went into the Marine Corps in 1966 or 1967, he would be sent to Vietnam. But he didn't want to sit idly by. "I didn't want to have to tell my kids that I dodged it or weaseled out of it," he says. "I thought that it was a good thing to be patriotic and to be responsible."

Joe Zorn held the same opinion: "I volunteered for Vietnam because I believed in my country and felt it was our generation's obligation to serve," he says. "I went over there to fight for my country. It was Apple Pie and Chevrolet."

Ed Yates volunteered to go to Vietnam to escape his regimented duty at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He didn't know anything about Vietnam except that there was a war going on there. "I knew I would be fighting but, hell, that's why I was in the Marine Corps," he

says. “That’s what I had been trained for. For me it was an adventure. Fighting for my country was also part of it. Killing communists who were trying to take over the world was too. But primarily, it was so I wouldn’t go back to Lejeune.”

But instead of going to Vietnam, Yates was sent on several assignments, including a six month deployment to the Mediterranean Sea as a member of an infantry battalion that was part of an Amphibious Ready Group. He returned to the States in December of 1966 and was assigned duty as a security guard at the Navy base in Clarksville, Tennessee. The duty was too restrictive for Yates. He had to sit on a bridge for hours. To pass the time, he sighted in his rifle on people driving by. Motorists reported him to his superiors, and he had to see a psychiatrist for a week. The psychiatrist’s report stated that he needed to be in “wide open spaces.” Yates didn’t argue. When his commander told him to choose between Vietnam and Camp Lejeune, he quickly chose Vietnam.

Dennis Antal’s story was similar. His first task as a Marine was watching over President Lyndon B. Johnson’s helicopters when they were not in use. He grew tired of this mundane guard duty, so he was excited when he got orders for Vietnam.

Mark Anderson also couldn’t wait to get to Vietnam, yet it seemed as if he would never get his wish. He remembered hearing about the battle of the Ia Drang Valley in 1965. In that battle, 450 members of the Army’s First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry were airlifted to a position that was immediately set upon by a regiment of 2,000 NVA soldiers, leading to one of the fiercest battles of the war. He thought that the war might be over before he had a chance to fight. *If you are in the military and you aren’t in Nam, what the hell are you in the military for?* he thought.

In boot camp, Anderson had volunteered to be an infantryman. In the Corps at that time, if a Marine asked to be an infantryman, he usually got his wish and was sent straight to Vietnam. Instead, Anderson was chosen to be a radioman. That meant more training rather than immediate assignment to “WestPac,” which almost always meant Vietnam. He was disappointed. He had joined the Marine Corps to keep from going to school. Yet the very first thing the Marines did was send him back to school.

While in radio school at Camp Lejeune, Anderson volunteered for Vietnam eight times, but the Corps would not send him. Because he

had some college preparatory classes, he was considered possible officer material. If chosen as an officer candidate, he would receive additional classroom training. That meant “more school” for the impatient 19-year-old.

That was not what Anderson wanted. But he endured the grueling interview process for officer candidates until he found himself being quizzed by three Marine Corps colonels. At the end of the interview, Anderson was asked if he had any questions. After thinking for a moment, he asked, “After becoming an officer, do I have to come back to the Marine Corps or can I go into the Navy?” The room fell silent.

After that stunt, Anderson received 34 days of mess duty peeling potatoes and a new set of orders – he was going to Vietnam.

Bill Perkins also realized that his Marine career wasn’t going as planned. Because of his interest in photography, he had been assigned as a Marine photographer in Barstow, California. But he didn’t like his new job. “All I do is take photos of the general in parades,” he complained to his family. He wanted to get into the Army motion picture school in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Marine cameramen were trained at the Army facility. He was finally accepted under one condition: he had to serve in Vietnam first.

Perkins knew that his parents would be upset with his new assignment, so he told them he was going to Okinawa. Technically, that was true since Okinawa was the staging area for Marines going to Vietnam.

After ITR, Phil Seymour began preparation for a deployment to the Mediterranean Sea. He participated in “wet-net” training for amphibious assaults launched over the side of a ship. At Camp Lejune, Marines would climb down the cargo nets of an LPA or LKA with their rifles and gear to board landing crafts that would take them to Onslow Beach. This was especially difficult for mortar men like Seymour because of the weight of the mortar parts, base plate, and ammunition. After several months of training, he spent time on a ship in the Mediterranean, and then was assigned to train newer Marines on the mortar equipment. But he didn’t want to miss out on the “fun and games,” so he requested an assignment in Vietnam. He got his wish.

Morgan Bice also found himself aboard ship, the USS Coral Sea, assigned to sea duty. One of his assignments, however, was not

typical: He was assigned to the security detail for Oscar-winning actress Jennifer Jones while she was aboard the ship to entertain the crew during a USO tour. Bice wrote to his mother saying that Jones promised she would write to his family when she returned to the States. Betty Bice didn't think much of her son's boast. After all, why would the star of "Madame Bovary" and the recent widow of superstar producer David O. Selznick write to a simple family from Texas?

Then, one Sunday morning while Betty was ironing a stack of clothes, the phone rang. "Mom, some woman wants to talk to you," her daughter Carolyn said. Betty turned off the iron and found herself talking with the Hollywood star, who told Betty what a fine son she had raised.

After ITR, Mike Robinson was assigned to the Marine Barracks at the 32nd Street Naval Station in San Diego where he performed base security functions as a member of the guard platoon. He soon became bored with this duty and volunteered to go to Vietnam. "I was very excited about doing my duty for my country," he says. "After a while, I couldn't wait for my number to come up. I had heard enough war stories. I wanted to prove what I could do." He finally received his orders in early 1967.

While Scott Thorne was being trained in communications, he and his buddies received orders for duty on the USS Pocono in the Mediterranean. They all protested. "No, no, no, no!" Thorne told his captain. "I didn't join to avoid Vietnam. I joined to get into Vietnam."

After hearing their complaints for three days, their captain confined them to barracks and gave them new orders to Vietnam.

Other Marines didn't journey to Vietnam voluntarily. After motor vehicle repair school at Camp Pendleton, LCpl Mike Cole was assigned to a tank battalion at Camp Lejeune in July of 1967. About ten days into the assignment, an unfamiliar officer walked in, ordered the men into a line, and said, "I need fifteen volunteers."

No one stepped forward. The men had learned one of the military's basic lessons: Never volunteer.

Then the officer said, "All NCOs and above step back." The PFCs and lance corporals, including Cole, were left standing in front. The officer said, "You fifteen are needed in Vietnam."

Cole was sent to Camp Geiger, nine miles west of Camp Lejeune,

for jungle training. He was no longer a vehicle repairman. He ended up in the rocket squad. He was taught to use the LAAW, or Light Antitank Assault Weapon, which replaced the bazooka, a weapon used in World War II and Korea. The LAAW was contained in a flexible, disposable fiberglass tube. When the weapon was ready to be fired, it extended from about 18 to 30 inches long. The round was already in the weapon, so when the safety was lifted, it was ready for use. Cole first met Dennis Antal and Fred Boxill in the rocket squad. They called themselves the ABC squad: Antal, Boxill, and Cole.

Dan Snell spent the Christmas of 1966 guarding the motor pool at Camp Lejeune. Shortly thereafter, he was shipped to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to serve under platoon commander Lieutenant Vic Kemp from Arkansas. Snell immediately admired Kemp not only as a Marine, but also as a human being. Kemp looked like he had stepped out of a Marine recruiting poster – young, muscular, and tan. He was a recent college graduate and former football player and boxer. The Lieutenant made himself personally responsible for his men's mental and physical well being. He ran and hiked Snell and the others all over Guantanamo Bay. Running them ragged, he would scream at them not to bunch up. "One grenade would kill you all," he would shout. Kemp encouraged all Marines who hadn't graduated from high school to take the GED and he even gave them some time to work on their own toward their diplomas. He had the men sign up for a variety of courses and helped Snell discover his love of maps.

Snell was at Gitmo for four months. Just after his eighteenth birthday, Lieutenant Kemp gave Snell a new set of orders. He was going to Vietnam.

Last Leave

A Marine was usually granted leave after ITR, The Basic School, or just prior to his duty in Vietnam. On his first leave to his hometown of Lake Worth, Florida, Cole noticed that the Marine Corps had changed him. "The people I knew in high school who were now in junior college seemed immature," he says. The other young people cruised the town, spent hours on the beach, played games, and fished on the pier. Cole realized he was no longer interested in the youthful activities he had enjoyed before entering the military. "They acted the same, but I didn't act the same to them. I had a different mindset. I wasn't interested in doing what I did before the Marine

Corps. That wasn't important to me anymore. I wanted to spend more time with the family, helping out where I could."

Many other young Marines discovered the same thing about themselves: they had matured much faster than their former classmates. When he got home, Antal's parents were still angry with him for joining the Marines, and they were concerned about him going to Vietnam. But most of his friends were excited for him. "Vietnam was a far-away place and the war was secondary," he says. "It was a big adventure."

After graduating from ITR, George Boze was granted a three-week Christmas leave in December 1966. He wanted to see his mother and sister in Indiana, but he didn't want to be around his abusive father. Before heading home, he spent some time with a buddy from boot camp, whose father was the superintendent of the Budweiser plant in Los Angeles. Boze and some others drove to Reseda, California, and were greeted by a welcome sight: a pick-up truck full of beer. "Six Marines can pack away a pick-up truck full of beer in three days," he says. "My friend's father came down and picked us up in this big limousine. We were drunk from the day he picked us up to the day he brought us back."

Stan Blessing also went home on leave in December 1966. He arrived in Denver on Christmas Eve without telling his family. He wanted to surprise them. He found his sister Kristi at work. Sneaking up behind her, he said: "Hey lady, how about a ride?" Kristi turned around and gave the rugged Marine a dirty look. At first, she didn't recognize him. When she realized that her brother had grown into a Marine, she began to laugh and cry at the same time. Blessing picked up his sister and swung her around.

Stan spent the day shopping for just the right gifts for his family. His parents and sister Kelly were overjoyed when Stan surprised them at the front door with an armload of gifts.

After spending three weeks with family and friends, Blessing returned to base for training in mountain and winter warfare. After that assignment, Blessing volunteered for Vietnam.

Before heading to war, Blessing came home on leave again. This time, he packed away his belongings and erased all the tapes of his voice. He told some friends goodbye. He said that he would not see them again.

When he received his orders for Vietnam, Scott Camil was also

granted leave. He went home to Florida and was proud to be a Marine. He wore his uniform everywhere, especially places where the high school kids hung out. “I felt like a man,” he says. “Even though I was underage, I could go to bars and get drinks. People knew that I was going to Vietnam.” He still remembers one particular song that was played over and over on the radio while he was on leave: Nancy Sinatra’s “These Boots are Made for Walking.”

At the end of ITR, Ed Yates received 20 days leave. He headed back home to Louisville, Kentucky, and found that his father had moved and hadn’t left a forwarding address.

Oliver Bell visited family and friends on his leave. His last stop was to his sister’s house. As he left, he told his sister: “Tell Mama I’m going to make her proud of me.”

Because of the urgent need for men, many Marines were barely able to catch their breaths before being sent to Vietnam. John Castillo finished boot camp and was allowed a brief leave to go home to Michigan. After weeks in boot camp, his main goals were to eat home- cooked meals, hang out with his friends, and borrow his sister’s car to cruise around town.

Gerald Brothers married a neighborhood girl on his leave. The couple had just a few weeks together before he had to leave for Vietnam.

During his leave after boot camp, George Dougherty went home and proposed to the girlfriend he had been with since he was 12. She noticed that he carried himself differently – he was more mature and was proud to be a Marine. On his second leave, they married, and she was seven months pregnant when he got his orders for Vietnam. Having a child on the way changed Dougherty’s view of going into combat. It bothered him that he was risking his life at a time when he was becoming responsible for another human being.

The Officers’ Route to WestPac

In 1962, The Vietnam War had yet to heat up. Second Lieutenant Bill Major didn’t know it then, but he was already on his way to WestPac when he became a rifle platoon commander at Camp Pendleton.

At that time, units had the luxury of training and shipping out together. Marines trained at the fireteam, squad, platoon, company and battalion levels. After training, a battalion would ship out to Okinawa as a transplacement battalion for thirteen months, relieving

another battalion which would then return stateside.

Shortly before his battalion shipped out, Major was promoted to first lieutenant and became the company executive officer, or XO, for Golf Company, Second Battalion, Third Marines, Third Marine Division. As the XO, Major was second in command of his company.

At the time, a Marine could not take his dependents overseas when he was deployed. That meant thirteen months away from his family. Major was married and had a son, and his wife delivered their daughter while he was gone. Major didn't see his daughter until she was seven months old. "That was tough, not only on the individual Marine but on the family as well," he says. "It's tough on a mom who has the sole responsibility of raising the kids, especially when a couple of them are in diapers."

After returning from Okinawa in 1963, Major was sent to Coronado, California, to help train Marine reserve units from all over the country. In 1964, he became the officer in charge of the Amphibious Reconnaissance School. While on duty at Coronado, he was promoted from first lieutenant to captain.

In early 1967, he received orders to report to a reconnaissance battalion that had just been organized at Camp Pendleton. The war had kicked into high gear. Major was told that he would be at Camp Pendleton for a year. But he had been there only three months when he received orders for Vietnam. The Corps needed replacement officers quickly. The days of Marines going to Vietnam as part of a trained unit were over. Because of casualties and duty rotations, Marines were now being sent over individually to fill holes in the ranks.

Even though he had extensive training in reconnaissance, Major didn't want to be assigned to a recon battalion. In Vietnam, the recon units worked in small teams. Officers usually didn't accompany the smaller units in the field. Chances were good that Major would spend his time in the rear handling administrative duties. The young captain did not want to be in the rear. He wanted to be where the action was. He wanted to be a rifle company commander in combat.

In November 1965, after his graduation from The Basic School, Jack Ruffer was assigned as a platoon commander with Company F, Second Battalion, Eighth Marines. Along with Second Battalion, he was deployed to provide security for the naval base at Guantanamo Bay for six months. His wife had their third child while he was at

Gitmo. Ruffer, as captain of the battalion rifle and pistol team, was allowed to return to the states to compete in the eastern division matches. At that time, he got to see his new son. But the visit was set amid ominous warnings: Ruffer got word that some of his classmates from The Basic School had been wounded in Vietnam.

In September of 1966, Ruffer was promoted to first lieutenant. He became the XO of Hotel Company, Second Battalion, Eighth Marines and embarked, along with his company, aboard the USS Guam. In the spring of 1967, he received orders for Vietnam by way of the Reconnaissance Officers Supporting Arms Course. This course taught officers how to coordinate naval fire, artillery fire, and close air support. He was being sent to Vietnam to be a reconnaissance officer, or at least he thought.

On his last leave, Ruffer had to make arrangements for his wife, Pat, and their three children, ages almost 5, 4, and 18 months. He moved his family from the east coast back to Southern California into the house next door to his wife's parents. He knew that his wife and his family would have plenty of support if something happened to him.

He also took care of some other tasks with morbid undertones. He updated his will and had a professional photograph taken of him in his dress uniform so his family would have a memento from him, just in case. He spent as much time with his family as he could.

The experiences of Jack and Pat Ruffer echoed those of other married couples about to be separated by war. To this point, his wife had been stoic about the new assignment. "Pat was a very good actress in those days," Ruffer says. "She exhibited terrific self-control, but when we talked quietly, just the two of us, there was something that went unspoken."

The night before he shipped out, they went out for one last dinner together. After the bartender and other patrons found out Ruffer was about to ship out, all the drinks were on the house. But for Pat Ruffer, the drinks could not stop the heartache that was building inside her.

"I wasn't sure how long he was going to be gone," she says. "I just prayed that God would watch over him."

But the quiet prayers were not enough to maintain her composure. The next morning, while she watched her husband walk to his flight at Norton Air Force Base, the stoic 24-year-old mother of three

finally broke down and cried.

Ruffer was already climbing the stairs to board his flight for Vietnam. He could see his wife crying, but there was nothing he could do.

He credits Pat for his success as a Marine Corps officer. “After all the separations while I was off being schooled, in training, on operations and deployments, there was one constant: my wife. She took care of the children, our home, our finances, everything that I cared about. Imagine leaving someone behind while you go off to war with the responsibility for three young children, one still in diapers, a household and the very real prospect that her husband would never return. How strong would you have to be to do that?”

After The Basic School, Second Lieutenant Robert Anderson went to Vietnam Language School in Monterey, California. Galvanized by the Marine experience, he didn’t hesitate when asked to rank the assignments he wanted. For an MOS he wrote down “infantry” and for duty station he wrote “Vietnam.”

The Final Step

The Marines had some last-minute training to complete before they would be prepared for warfare. Jungle training was a standard part of preparation for Vietnam. The men learned to work and fight under hot, steamy conditions and learned skills that would help them survive.

After Scott Camil completed his training in fire direction control, he volunteered for Vietnam. He received his orders right away and set out for Camp Pendleton, where he endured more general conditioning and infantry training. He also learned useful lessons in guerilla warfare, mountain climbing, escape and evasion.

But some of the skills learned in jungle training were less than useful. Ron Coss remembers an incident when an instructor took a rabbit, broke its neck, and skinned it. “This is how you’ll survive in Vietnam,” the instructor said. There was one problem with this, Coss reports: “There were no rabbits in Vietnam.”

The Navy corpsmen in particular had to learn a new set of skills. Treating the wounded on a Navy ship was far different from treating wounded on a battlefield. For one thing, the wounds were different. Wayne Dowd went to Camp Pendleton for Field Medical School. The corpsmen watched films about battalion aid stations in Korea and

WWII to see battle wounds. The men would then go out and practice: Their instructors would tell them that a "patient" had a particular wound, and the corpsmen would demonstrate the procedures they would use to treat that wound.

Field Medical School also taught corpsmen how to evacuate wounded Marines and how to navigate a stretcher over rough terrain. Training in the use of firearms was also emphasized, an ominous sign that the corpsmen would be working under hazardous conditions.

After sniper school, Rod Lewis went through a two-week Vietnam training course at Camp Pendleton. The training area featured a replica of a Vietnamese village that was used to teach the men stealth and camouflage. An instructor would stand on a hillside, and the trainees would sneak through the scrub brush to see how close they could get before the instructor spotted them. They were taught to reveal only name, rank, and serial number if they were caught and tortured by the enemy. But Lewis wasn't worried about being captured. He always felt safe being with other Marines.

After boot camp, Priddy and Perkins were assigned together for combat readiness training. As with everything else they did together, they found humor in the situation. One exercise involved walking through terrain to avoid mock booby traps. The trainees simply followed the footprints of the men who had taken the challenge earlier, thus avoiding the traps. *This is funny,* they thought. They thought it was amusing that the military would set up an elaborate exercise where the men didn't really learn anything.

After a few weeks leave back home in Charlotte, Dan Snell went to Camp Pendleton to prepare for Vietnam. He practiced firing the M16 for the first time and was trained on other weapons. He was given numerous vaccinations. On weekends, he went to Disneyland or Tijuana. He and the other Marines drank and enjoyed life as much as they could, just in case they didn't make it back home. California in 1967 seemed like another world. Although the hippie movement was going strong, there weren't anti-war protests yet. In fact, it seemed to Snell that Vietnam existed only for the military personnel and not for the average American.

After his leave, Antal also reported to Camp Pendleton for combat training. He also was introduced to the M16 rifle. At first, he didn't like the M16 because it tended to jam. He discovered, however, that

if he took care of the weapon, it was a great battle companion. “You could fall face first in mud with the M16 and come out firing with it,” he says. “It saved my life more than once.”

After his leave, David Welsh qualified for language school at Presidio de Monterey in Monterey, California. He studied Vietnamese for three or four weeks before returning to Camp Pendleton and then shipping out for Vietnam.

Stan Blessing had a faster track to the fighting. After being home on leave, he went back to San Diego and then on to Okinawa for three days before heading to Vietnam.

In Country

It was obvious that Marines were sorely needed in Vietnam. Cooks, mechanics, and other support personnel became rocket men, machine gunners, and mortar men. Casualties were high and those casualties had to be replaced.

Because they were all replacements, the Marines who would fight together on Operation Medina in October of 1967 arrived in Vietnam at different times. Some, like Scott Camil, John Lee and Brad Foote had been in Vietnam over a year. Others, like Mike Cole, Dennis Antal, Phil Hartranft, Stan Blessing and Robert Anderson arrived in the early fall just before the operation began.

In January 1967, after he completed training at Camp Pendleton, Second Lieutenant Paul Nelson boarded a troop transport ship bound for Vietnam. The ship held about 2,500 Marines. During the 20-day voyage, Nelson contracted amoebic dysentery. By the time he arrived in Vietnam, he was so sick that he was hospitalized near Da Nang. Despite his illness, the war-torn country made an immediate impression as he traveled to the hospital.

“Vietnam was a jolt,” he says. “It was very hot. The country was backward, rural, and the people were poor. It was very dirty.” He saw a bus on the side of the street with a stream of water coming out of the window. At least he thought it was a stream of water. He took a second look and realized that someone was urinating out the bus window.

After he was released from the hospital, Nelson was assigned to Charlie Company, First Battalion, First Marine Regiment, First Marine Division. He would command Third Platoon. Both of the Third Platoon commanders before him had been disabled in combat.

One had lost both legs and the other, Nelson's former Quantico classmate Jerry Mulder, had lost the use of an arm in a grenade explosion.

When radioman Mark Anderson finally received his orders for Vietnam in late spring of 1967, he had been in the Corps a year. The extra preparation gave him an advantage. "I think that the guys who went straight to Vietnam from boot camp had a harder time mentally. I got to learn about the Marine Corps for a year. I learned the ins and outs, how to play the games, how to deal with the lifers and the officers. It certainly let me know the culture I was in. It's radically different from the civilian world. The guys from boot camp didn't get to learn this. They went right to the fire."

His plane landed in Okinawa. Arriving Marines were brought into a staging area to store items they wouldn't need like winter and dress uniforms. The men were issued jungle utilities and given a series of shots, including a painful gamma globulin shot administered in the buttocks to ward off a local form of hepatitis. The shot often made it difficult for the men to sit down for a day or two. The men were also issued malaria pills to be taken daily. The supply personnel were careful to store each Marine's nonessential gear so that it would be easy to find if the man were killed in combat. "That is when you start realizing that you might not be coming back," Anderson says.

At Okinawa, Anderson saw for the first time Marines returning from duty in Vietnam. The sight left an indelible impression. "They looked like they were 65 years old, but they were 20. You're 19 and you look like a bunny rabbit. You're a little cherry boy, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed."

"When I saw those guys, I was sure that I was going to die," he says. He had already been warned that radio operators were "marked men" with a life expectancy of two weeks. He decided to accept the fact that he was marked for death. "I decided to accept it, go and do the best I could, and if I got blown away, I got blown away."

Arriving in Da Nang in the fall of '66, Dougherty was assigned to Charlie Company, First Battalion, First Marines. At the time, Charlie Company was located near Hoi An, a city southeast of Da Nang.

The Marines were trucked to Hoi An in "six-bys," 2 ½-ton trucks used to haul troops and supplies. Once the trucks were past the last protected checkpoint in Da Nang, they began speeding down the rough, unpaved roads to avoid being ambushed. For over an hour,

the Marines bounced around violently in the back of the truck. The men screamed at the drivers to slow down. By the roadside, they caught their first fleeting views of the countryside: rice paddies, water buffaloes, local residents – mostly women and children. The men were off fighting the war. “By the time we got to Hoi An, I was bruised and battered,” Dougherty says. “I thought I’d just been in a 12-round fight with Cassius Clay.”

Kevin Cahill and Phil Seymour were among the Marines who took a ship to Vietnam. Both men were from the Boston area, so they talked about some of their common experiences. They discovered other men from Massachusetts on the ship and talked about eventually having a reunion back in Boston. They spent most of the 20-day voyage playing the card game “Hearts.” The men stayed at White Beach on Okinawa a day or two, where their most memorable image was seeing cases of free beer stacked and waiting for them. After leaving Okinawa, their ship pulled into Da Nang Harbor just after Christmas in 1966.

When Seymour got a view of the dark green hills around DaNang, he was struck by the ominous cloud that seemed to hang over everything. He learned that it was monsoon season, when the sky seldom cleared. It would be almost three months before he would see a patch of blue sky. He was also struck by the strong odor around Da Nang, something that smelled like rotting food or decaying vegetation.

He had little contact with the Vietnamese people. “We certainly didn’t speak their language; they didn’t speak ours. The impression that I had, overall, is that by and large the Vietnamese people simply wanted to go about their lives. They really didn’t care about politics.” Seymour could see conflict in the Vietnamese. “Unfortunately, they were caught between a rock and a hard place. If they helped the VC, there was retribution from the American side. If they helped the American side, there was reprisal from the VC and NVA.”

Seymour and Cahill were assigned to First Battalion, First Marines. During a brief orientation program, the Marines were told about the enemy, the local terrain, the existence of booby traps and other dangers. They received their M14 rifles and practiced firing at short range and adjusting their sights.

It would be awhile before Seymour would realize the training was useless. “I can’t recall any time in Vietnam that I ever used my

sights," he says. "Never used my sights; it was always just over the barrel."

While the newcomers trained, Seymour saw helicopters bring in dead and wounded men. The dead Marines, wrapped in ponchos, were transferred into the bay of a waiting UH-34 helicopter. The matter of fact way that the dead were handled struck Phil. He commented to a fellow Marine, "They kind of take dying casually over here." The men had heard rumors that Charlie Company had been losing a lot of people. He told his buddy: "I hope we don't get assigned to Charlie Company."

George Boze spent his last night in the States at the Marine Corps Air Station El Toro near Los Angeles. The departing Marines were taken to the local theater to watch *Born Free*, the story of Elsa the lion cub, who was raised by game wardens in Kenya before being released to the wild. At the end of the movie, when Elsa bade farewell to her human family, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. The men weren't necessarily crying because of the movie. "We were headed to Vietnam the next morning," Boze remembers.

The next morning, Boze and the others boarded a Continental Airlines 707 bound for Hawaii. The flight featured pretty stewardesses and plenty of alcohol. The jet refueled in Honolulu and then, following a course designed to build up pride, the Marines flew over Wake Island and Iwo Jima before landing in Okinawa.

At Camp Hansen, Okinawa, Boze and the other men were forced by an imposing "gunny" (gunnery sergeant) to watch a movie about donating blood. The sergeant had been a semi-professional boxer in civilian life. After the movie, the men were asked to volunteer to give blood. Out of about 150 men, only three or four raised their hands. The gunny stepped to the microphone and said, "You can either give it out the arm or through the nose." All hands went up.

Boze stayed at Camp Hansen for about two days. There wasn't much to do on Okinawa. Many of the Marines went to Kin Village, a little town that consisted of little more than whorehouses, tattoo parlors, and bars. After a night there, Boze boarded another commercial jet. This one was bound for Da Nang. "The stewardesses on the flight were very, very sympathetic," he says. "They knew exactly where we were going."

Like Paul Nelson, Boze arrived in Vietnam in January of 1967. He was shocked at what he encountered in Da Nang. "It was like the

John Wayne movie *The Green Berets*. When they opened the doors on that air-conditioned aircraft, it was like being hit with a blast furnace. The smell of rotten garbage hits you in the face and it's 110 degrees out. I never experienced hot like Vietnam."

Boze was assigned to the First Battalion, First Marine Regiment, First Marine Division. He stayed in temporary billets for three days until he could get transportation to 1/1, which was located near Hoi An. On the evening before he left, Boze was treated to a free steak dinner. But the steak was hardly a treat. It was a bull that had been run over by a military vehicle.

Sitting on the plane headed for Vietnam, R.J. Jackson was exactly where he wanted to be. He was on his way to fight the war for America. He didn't know where Vietnam was. He didn't even know where Southeast Asia was.

He also didn't know what was in the dark expanse under the plane. He turned to his seatmate and asked, "Do you think we're over an ocean?"

"Well, where do you think we're going?" the other man asked.

"I don't know," Jackson said. "I've never flown before."

The other Marines got a good laugh at Jackson's expense. The plane landed in Hawaii before going on to Okinawa. Jackson eventually landed in Da Nang and found himself in a giant tent with hundreds of other Marines waiting to receive their orders. One by one, the men were told the organizations to which they were being assigned. Hours passed, and Jackson still sat in the tent. Soon only a few men remained. He went up to the officer in charge to see what the problem was.

"Who are you?" the man demanded. "Jackson."

"What's your MOS?" "8541."

"What in the hell's that?" "Well, a scout/sniper, sir."

"Oh, you're one of them." The officer consulted some papers and assigned Jackson to First Marines' Regimental Headquarters. "How do I get there?" Jackson asked.

"Get your sea bag and go stand over there," the officer said. "When a truck comes by, tell them where you're going and they'll drop you off, but they're going to drop you off by the road at one spot, and you'll have to wait for another truck to come by."

The 19-year-old was stunned. *Wait a minute. You're turning me loose in this country?* he thought. It was the first time he experienced fear

since he had joined the Marines.

Steve Kane arrived in Vietnam on 16 April 1967. He was struck by the fact that it was only April, yet the daytime temperature was already 100 degrees. After a few months of mundane assignments – guard duty, radio watch, mess duty – he hooked up with Scott Camil and became his radio operator.

Rod Lewis left for Vietnam on 24 April 1967. Like many Marines, Lewis gave blood in Okinawa for the wounded in Vietnam. As a reward, he was given a shot of whiskey. As he walked toward the lunch line, he passed out. Next thing he knew, he was on the floor regaining consciousness. The intense heat combined with the whiskey and blood loss had taken him down.

Lewis was issued jungle utilities, but the supply personnel didn't have any boots to fit his size-12 feet. He ended up going into combat with his leather ones. When they had almost rotted off, due to the heat and humidity, some combat boots were finally sent to him on a medevac chopper.

In July of 1967, Dan Snell boarded a Continental Airlines jet bound for Okinawa. The stewardesses in miniskirts made it feel like the plane was headed to a vacation paradise, not a war zone. The plane flew west, into the sun, so the days seemed to last forever. When he reached Okinawa, it was like reaching "the other side of the world," he says. Okinawa was so hot and humid that Snell couldn't sleep his first night there. At 4 o'clock in the morning he found himself lying awake on top of the sheets in a pool of sweat.

After a couple of weeks on Okinawa, Snell boarded a C-130 for Vietnam. There were no more stewardesses. The C-130s didn't even have seats. Snell and the other Marines sat in web harnesses. The roar of the plane made it impossible for the men to hear each other, so they mostly sat in silence, lost in their own thoughts, wondering what was ahead of them. Full of fear and fascination, Snell looked out his window at the countryside. He wondered what was waiting for him down there and how he would handle himself in combat.

When he got off the plane, Snell noticed that some of the hangars had bent walls. It turned out that Da Nang had been rocketed for the first time shortly before he arrived. The concussion had damaged some of the buildings.

Snell and the other Marines went to the staging area, which was nothing more than open-air tents, sandbags, and an oil-coated road.

When he found out that he was going to be there over night, Snell got permission from the officer in charge to find his father. Snell's dad was working for a construction company in Da Nang. Snell quickly found out where his father was living and headed off on foot.

Snell found his father in a small trailer equipped with electricity, air conditioning, good food, and a hot shower. "Anyone else would think that my dad's accommodations were Spartan," he says. "For me, it was the most comfortable night I spent in Vietnam." Snell hadn't seen his father in almost a year, and a lot had changed since then. "For the first time, I was actually grown up when I saw him. I had my first beer in Vietnam with my dad."

The next morning, Snell's father drove him back to staging. Later that day, he got on a six-by with several other Marines and drove south to Charlie Company, First Battalion, First Marines. When he arrived, Snell was issued an M16 and his field gear. It was then that he realized his Vietnam journey was really beginning.

When Snell arrived, Charlie Company was located at the Sand Dunes, a company patrol base. He was assigned to the second rocket squad of weapons platoon. His squad members were Joe Zorn, Mike Hamer, Tony Baumgartner, and Ron Coss.

After attending Field Medical School, "Doc" Dowd flew to Vietnam and was attached to First Battalion, First Marines. He arrived on 2 or 3 July 1967, and was in Da Nang on the Fourth of July. He remembers seeing the illumination rounds that the Marines fired in the air to celebrate.

George Hutchings received a less celebratory welcome. As his 727 touched down in Da Nang, it came under enemy fire. The new arrivals were hustled off the plane and into nearby foxholes. With no weapons to defend themselves, the men crouched down in the holes. The plane turned and took off, leaving them to their new lives. Eventually, the shooting died down, and some Marines matter-of-factly continued the process of getting the new arrivals on trucks and getting them to their assigned units. Hutchings realized that being shot at would be part of his regular routine in Vietnam.

When Mike Robinson arrived in March of 1967, his first impression of Vietnam was that it was something out of a movie – a war movie with a lot of bunkers. Before he was even issued a weapon, he and other new arrivals heard artillery and mortars coming in around them. *Man, this is for real,* he thought. The heat, humidity, and insects

took their toll right away: The men were given "bug juice," an insect repellent, but to Robinson the formula seemed to attract more insects than it repelled.

By 1967, when some Marines who would serve on Medina were just coming into Vietnam, others were already old-timers. Brad Foote joined the Marine Corps in 1965. When his first tour in Vietnam ended in early 1967, he extended for six months. When his friend John Lee found out that Foote had extended, Lee did the same. It sounded like a good plan: after only six months, each man could practically choose where in the world he wanted to serve. Both men were assigned to Charlie Company.

The two best friends were an odd pair: Lee was small and quiet; Foote, who weighed 153 pounds, was boisterous. Foote was fair-haired; Lee's hair was dark. When he came home in the spring of '67, Lee was more mature, more sure of himself. He was sure of his plans, too. He and Foote bought a 40-acre piece of land in central Oregon and planned to build their houses on the land and start a business together after their tour in Vietnam.

Lee's family wasn't thrilled with the decision. His mother cried at the thought of another six months of worrying. But his mind was made up. After 30 days leave, he and Foote returned to Vietnam. Foote was assigned to the Second Platoon of Charlie 1/1, and Lee was assigned to Third Platoon.

Salvador Bazulto had more personal reasons for re-enlisting. Before he joined the Corps, at age 17, Salvador attended an event called a *"Quinceañera"*, the traditional celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday. There he met a young girl named Cecilia and the two quickly became friends.

Bazulto had a high school sweetheart when he started his first tour, but soon received a "Dear John" letter from her while he was overseas. At the same time, he had been exchanging friendly letters with Cecilia. The correspondences between the two became more personal. When he finished his tour and came home in 1966, Cecilia was a junior in high school. They married in July 1967, one month after Cecilia graduated. A few weeks later, Salvador dropped a bombshell: he had signed up for another tour in Vietnam. He wanted to serve his country and he wanted the extra combat pay he would get on a second tour; after all, his new wife had become pregnant. He told Cecilia he knew their baby was going to be a boy, and he was

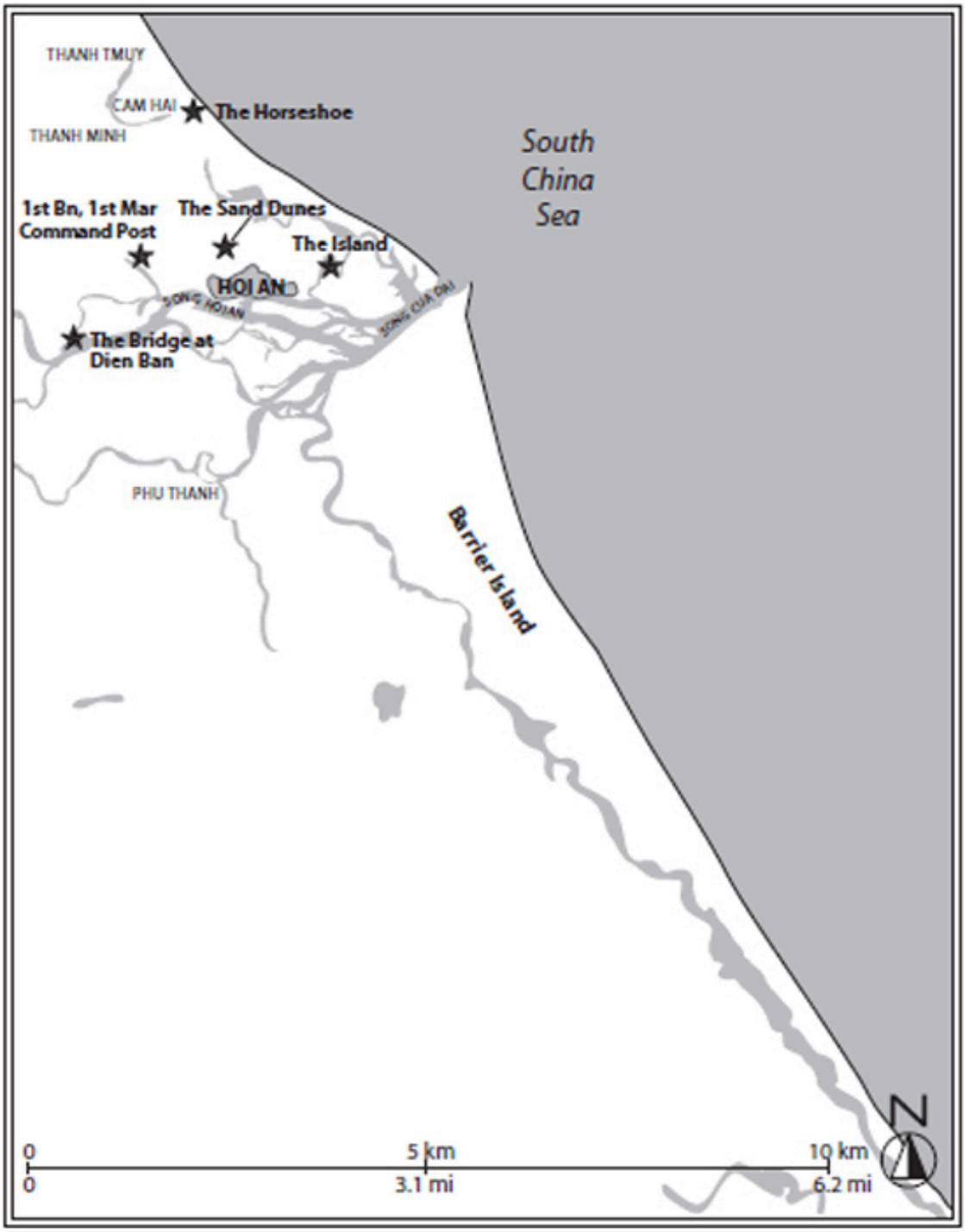
determined to support his son the best way he knew how.

Cecilia spent a lot of time crying during their short time together. Salvador tried to reassure her, but to little avail. The last day of his leave was 5 August 1967. The couple spent the entire day together. Then, around 4 in the afternoon, Sal gave Cecilia one last kiss and got in the car for the drive to San Diego. “I remember standing outside my parents’ house in the front yard watching him drive away.” Cecilia says. “I stood there and watched him turn the corner, our eyes just staring at each other. I remember him turning and waving to me. Then he was gone.”

Ed Krisko had a different reason for signing on for another tour in Vietnam. He was bored. After completing his first tour, he was assigned to Camp Lejeune. But playing war games wasn’t the same anymore. He wanted to do what he had been trained to do, so he signed up to go back to Vietnam in July of 1967. He was assigned to Charlie Company, 1/1.

Phil Hartranft was a grunt until his time came to re-enlist in 1964. He had the option of leaving the Corps completely. His choice was easy: he wanted to stay a Marine. But he wanted to do something other than lug a rifle around. Phil decided to become a journalist. He re-enlisted, enrolled in the journalism school at Ft. Slocum, New York, and became a combat correspondent.

From 1965 to 1967, Hartranft worked in the Division of Information at Headquarters, Marine Corps in Washington, D.C. He made sergeant and then staff sergeant. In June of 1967, he received his orders for Vietnam. He received additional training as a combat correspondent at Camp Pendleton in late summer of 1967. He learned that even though he would carry a rifle, his first job was to get the story. Soon thereafter, he was on a commercial jet bound for Vietnam.



Expanded area of operations for First Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, vicinity of Hoi An, early to mid-1967.

4 Baptism by Fire

In 1967, Da Nang was the second largest city in South Vietnam and a vital port on the South China Sea. In addition to its expansive, safe harbor, Da Nang had a large airbase that could support substantial air operations against North Vietnam. The area, therefore, had great strategic importance for the overall defense of South Vietnam and had to be protected.

The First Marine Regiment was part of the comprehensive defense of Da Nang. The Marines formed a protective semi-circle around the city, with the South China Sea on the city's opposite side. All of the different positions, from platoon, to company up to battalion, regiment, and division, provided a rocket barrier defense for Da Nang. That included the harbor, the airfield, and the city itself. Because of this defense, the only way the enemy could hit Da Nang would be to infiltrate the Marine defense. Despite the strong Marine presence, there were many holes through which the enemy could infiltrate. Overall, however, this was a successful strategy for defending the city.

The area around the town of Hoi An, located about 25 miles southeast of Da Nang, was part of the overall defense of Da Nang. In early 1967, Hoi An was the tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) for the First Battalion, First Marines. The battalion's four rifle companies, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta rotated duty in three key areas known as the Mud Flats, the Sand Dunes (with the outlying area of Cam Thanh known as the Island), and the Horseshoe. The platoons occupying those sites conducted daily patrols and "scorpions" (night ambush patrols) and also set out observation and listening posts to detect the approach of enemy soldiers.

A Marine battalion was made up of five companies: four rifle companies and a Headquarters and Service (H&S) Company. A rifle company consisted of three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon. By Table of Organization (T/O), each rifle platoon was made up of three squads of 14 men each. Each squad was made up of three fireteams. There were four men in a fireteam: the fireteam leader, automatic rifleman, assistant automatic rifleman, and a rifleman. The weapons platoon in a rifle company consisted of three sections: 60mm mortars, a rocket section, and a machine gun section. However, in Vietnam, the weapons platoon was frequently divided among the

rifle platoons. Each platoon was given two machine gun and two rocket teams. The 81mm mortars were located at battalion headquarters. The 60mm mortars stayed with the company and accompanied a platoon when needed. The 60mm mortars, rocket and machine gun sections each had their own section leader.

Charlie Company was a typical rifle company with three rifle platoons. Each platoon consisted of a platoon commander (usually a first or second lieutenant), a platoon sergeant, platoon guide, platoon radio operator, three squads of 14 men each, and one or two Navy corpsmen. Each squad was made up of three four-man fireteams, a squad leader, and a grenadier who carried an M79 grenade launcher. At least, that's how it would have been in perfect conditions. But Vietnam was far from perfect. Squads in Vietnam were almost always undermanned, usually consisting of 8 to 10 men instead of 14. This was the result of attrition. Marines were either killed, wounded, or rotated home when their tours of duty were complete. There were never enough replacements.

The Marines found their skills tested immediately when they were assigned their first missions in the war zone. This was a result of the shortage of manpower and the fact that Marines who had trained together as a team in the States did not always serve together in the same units in Vietnam. Many hadn't been fully trained for the fight ahead, and they found themselves learning some hard lessons quickly.

Taking Command

After he recovered from his bout with amoebic dysentery, Second Lieutenant Paul Nelson was not immediately given command of Charlie Company's Third Platoon. Instead, he accompanied other platoons when they went out on patrol. As an observer, he learned valuable lessons that would serve him well when he took command himself. One lesson he learned was that patrols were constantly the target of enemy snipers.

"You became a combat veteran quickly," he says. The danger wasn't too high since the snipers were usually some distance away. But the constant threat of a bullet striking from out of nowhere was unsettling. "If you ever sat down and thought about it, it would drive you nuts," he says. "You couldn't help but think that there was nothing you could do to avoid being hit."

The challenge of taking over a platoon helped Nelson keep his mind off the dangers involved. Personal feelings like fear were forced into the background. “I wanted to be a good platoon leader,” he says. “A successful platoon leader minimizes casualties. He knows how to follow orders and get his men to do what needs to be done.”

Nelson was only 23 at the time, but he had incredible responsibilities. His platoon operated from what was known as a platoon patrol base. Third Platoon would occupy one area in the company’s TAOR for a period of time and then rotate to another. The job was demanding, especially when the fast turnover of Marines due to casualties or rotations was factored in. He planned and organized patrol routes. He had to oversee the training of new men. He had to train and appoint new squad leaders. He also had to motivate Marines who were now in constant danger. A Marine, for example, might turn up “sick” right before a risky night ambush patrol. Nelson would have to say, “Hey, if you can walk, you have to go. What if everybody came in and said they were sick?”

For the most part, Nelson was impressed with the men in his platoon, particularly with some excellent squad leaders who were about to rotate out. He did encounter, however, a persistent problem among men who had been in country for several months: hostility toward the local villagers. “When your buddies had been casualties and you couldn’t trust the locals, when you didn’t know who was VC and who wasn’t, people had a tendency to say that they were all bad,” he says. “There were guys who were so angry, that if you let them, they would have abused some of these people. They would slap them around.” More than once Nelson had to intervene by pulling his men off of local villagers. The salts (veterans) would tell him, “Just wait, Lieutenant. You’ll change. You’ll become just like we are.”

“I had to keep my eyes open to this problem and stay alert,” he says. “War is nasty business and nasty stuff happened, especially with 19-year-old guys who had lost their best friend the day before. 19 isn’t very old.”

The problem was made worse by the fact that Nelson’s platoon was frequently in “Indian country,” areas controlled by the enemy, and in “free-fire zones,” areas in which anyone who wasn’t a Marine could be taken under fire without clearance from some higher headquarters. In these regions, every Vietnamese was considered an enemy. The hostility toward the locals was further exacerbated when

atrocities were committed against Americans. Nelson recalled an incident when some dead Marines were found strung up with their genitals cut off. “You will never see a higher level of anger and hatred than what you experience in combat,” he says.

Thoughts of Home

The ferocity of the war was an immediate shock to many of the young men. Any respite from the immediate dangers they faced was welcome. Thoughts quickly turned to home. The men wrote constantly and looked forward to any letter or package from friends and family.

Pat and Jack Ruffer had promised each other that they would write every day. Jack wasn’t always able to keep that promise if his duties prevented him from writing, but he managed to write at least three letters a week. Jack could count on Pat to write nearly every day, send cassette tapes from their children, send him the spices he requested to spark up his C-Ration meals, and provide him with love and intimate conversation from a long distance.

“Our wives were the ones who really deserved the medals,” he says. “We were in harm’s way every day, but it was the wives who had to deal with fear the most. As far as I’m concerned, every one of them deserves a medal, and a senior medal at that.”

Bill Perkins sent his father a letter accompanied by an expensive Canon camera that he had purchased. When he first showed an interest in photography, Bill’s father gave him a Kodak Flash Phantom to get him started. Bill took that camera to Vietnam. Bill thanked his father by sending him the more expensive Canon.

A letter helped Priddy and Perkins meet in Okinawa. The two met, spent the evening out on the town, and then slept off the night of drinking and carousing in Priddy’s barracks.

Stan Blessing’s letters home described heat, sand and loneliness. “How strange,” he wrote, “to see sand everywhere and no sea.” He used letters to his sister Kelly to work out issues he struggled with about the war. As a Christian, he had been taught not to kill. Yet killing was now a part of his duty. He sent her a picture from Vietnam with the message, “I love you very much, love Stan.” In his letters to his mother, he told her how much he wished he were back home.

Oliver Bell would write home to his mother, Annie Mae, when he

could. He tried to send home savings bonds, hoping his mother would be able to save enough money to move from her apartment building into a home of her own.

In his letters home, Morgan Bice avoided talking about the war. He didn't want to upset his mother. He warned his sister Carolyn that she and her boyfriend had better behave themselves while he was gone. And he always made a point of asking how his two dogs, Mindy and Skipper, were. Just thinking about his dogs helped keep his mind off the dangers he faced.

When George Dougherty arrived in Vietnam in October 1966, he thought he had an advantage. Unlike many of the other Marines on his flight, he had already spent a year and a half in the service; most of the others were coming straight out of boot camp. Yet when he arrived at his new post with Charlie Company's Second Platoon, he learned that he was just another new guy who got the cold shoulder from Marines who had been in country.

There was a reason that the salts didn't get too close to the new men. The inexperienced rookies were more likely to get killed. The pain of seeing friends die was simply too great. Some veterans would teach the new arrivals some tricks for survival. Acting correctly in the field was a matter of self-preservation for all of the Marines, not just the rookie. The salts taught them, for example, how to tape up their dog tags so that they didn't make noise. They showed them how to smoke a cigarette with their hands cupped over the end so that the light wouldn't show with each puff. With the exception of these lessons, however, the veterans avoided the new men, at least for the first few months.

The Raid

Like Dougherty, LCpl Phil Seymour was also a rookie. Even though he was new in country, he was promoted to corporal within weeks of his arrival in early 1967. He quickly received orders to the 60mm mortar section that was assigned to Charlie Company. And, just as quickly, he saw combat.

On 14 January 1967, Charlie Company made a lightning hit and run helicopter assault on the village of Ban Lanh 2, which was located in the Quang Nam Province. The Raid was based on intelligence received from a defector about a meeting of Viet Cong senior officers that was to take place in the village church. The meeting was

supposed to be low profile with little military support, so the Marines didn't expect much resistance. But when Captain Marshall Carter, commander of Charlie Company, flew out with his men on helicopters into the rice paddies surrounding the village, his aircraft immediately started taking fire.

First Platoon landed first and secured the landing zone (LZ) for the two assault platoons. The assault platoons landed and began to make their way toward the village. Seymour moved forward with the platoons, but he never made it to the tiny hamlet. Enemy mortar rounds started falling around him. He was hit by shrapnel in the back of the leg and thrown to the ground.

The other platoons moved forward without him. Resistance was heavy, but after about an hour, the main assault platoon had fought its way into the village and was approaching the church. The initial enemy reaction was to fight the Americans with a delaying force about the size of a company while other enemy personnel fled the village. Despite heavy automatic weapons fire from hedgerows and fence lines, one platoon made it to the church. The cadre of VC officers was not found, so the decision was made to extract the company.

The assault platoon began to fight its way out of the village and back to the LZ, but they were held back. The body of one of their comrades lay along a narrow trail covered by heavy automatic weapons fire. The Marines had already taken several casualties trying to extract the body and the VC forces facing the platoon were rapidly increasing. Yet the Marines would not leave one of their own behind.

With complete disregard for his own personal safety, Captain Carter exposed himself to the heavy volume of enemy fire and pulled the fallen Marine to a point where he could be further evacuated. Carter then covered the withdrawal of the platoon by single handedly hurling grenades at the VC in close combat. Upon returning to the landing zone, the Captain supervised the loading of his entire company into helicopters before he himself would leave. For his extraordinary heroism, Captain Carter was awarded the Navy Cross, the Navy's second highest decoration for combat valor.[1]

For his part, Phil Seymour had only been in Vietnam a few weeks and he was already wounded. He was evacuated from the battlefield

and spent about a week in a field hospital. It wouldn't be long before he would see combat again.

The day after he was treated to the free steak dinner (the bull that had been killed by a military truck) in Da Nang, George Boze and three other Marines were ordered onto a six-by that was headed for Hoi An. The truck was full of 81mm mortar ammunition. Boze had yet to be issued any weapon or gear. As they drove the 25 miles from Da Nang to Hoi An, the ammo-laden truck was sniped at by VC guerillas. Boze and the three Marines were defenseless. The driver had a pistol, but no ammunition. Another Marine had a rifle but no magazines. Luckily, the VC were not good shots. Boze and his comrades arrived safely in Hoi An.

George signed in at battalion headquarters on 17 January 1967. The area around Hoi An reminded him of the Mojave Desert. The South China Sea was to the east and mountains rose to the west beyond the rice paddies.

Boze's first assignment was not as a mortar man. He was ordered to burn the "shitters." Shitters were empty 55-gallon fuel drums that had been cut in half. They were placed underneath the toilets and used for defecation. The urinals consisted of used 155mm ammunition tubes that emptied into a 55-gallon drum buried in the sand. When a shitter was full, the men would replace it with an empty drum. They would then dispose of the contents in the full drum by setting it on fire. Many of the Marines were assigned this task when they first arrived in Vietnam.

It wasn't long, however, before Boze was assigned to the 81mm mortar platoon, which was part of the Battalion's H&S Company. On rare occasions, a portion of the 81mm mortar platoon would be allocated to one of the separate rifle companies for support as needed. Normally, the platoon would support the battalion's companies from their platoon location located with the battalion headquarters.

When standard artillery could not be used, the 81mm mortars filled in the gap. The mortars were often used when there were small hills or a village between the Marines and the enemy. The mortars allowed for indirect fire: shooting over any terrain or other obstacle and then onto the target. The mortars were fired at a high angle, and the rounds would drop on the enemy. Boze participated in twelve major operations from January through October 1967.

In April of 1967, Mike Robinson arrived at First Battalion, First Marines. He was immediately assigned to Charlie Company. He was issued all of his combat gear, including a flak jacket, which he always wore, no matter how hot it was. Robinson was trucked out to the Horseshoe, which, at the time, was the platoon patrol base for Lieutenant Paul Nelson's Third Platoon.

When he was assigned to a squad, Robinson was shocked to learn that his squad leader was a PFC (Private First Class). Squad leaders usually held the rank of sergeant. Robinson quickly realized, however, that his squad leader was an experienced fighter. The fact that the Marine was still alive showed that he knew what he was doing.

Robinson learned from his squad leader and the other experienced men. "We don't play John Wayne around here," he was told. "You don't stand up and shoot your rifle like in the movies. The hero keeps the other guy alive, stays alive himself, and does his job. If you get any incoming, get your head down, get to cover, and then return fire."

That advice was put to good use on Robinson's first scorpion (night ambush patrol). The men tried to move stealthily, but somehow the enemy spotted them and opened fire in the darkness. Robinson didn't know what to do. He couldn't see a thing. He had no experience fighting at night. He could see only the flashes of weapons fire. Adrenaline flooded his body, and he just followed what the Marine next to him was doing – getting his head down, getting to cover, and returning fire in the direction of the incoming rounds.

"All of these guys had been there, done that," he says. "You don't have time to think. It's not like it is in school when you have time to look up the answer to a problem. You just have to do it."

When Robinson returned from that patrol, he was drenched with sweat from head to toe. He was still shaking, still scared. He thought, *I don't know about this, man. I've got thirteen months. We've got a long ways to go, brother! Calm down, calm down...*"

Shortly after Robinson arrived at the Horseshoe, the men in his squad were issued the new M16 semi-automatic rifles instead of their M14s. The M16 would prove itself to be a great weapon, but when it was first issued, it had a deadly habit of jamming. On his squad's first scorpion with the new rifle, a firefight broke out with the VC. Every M16 in the squad jammed. The Marines managed to escape only

because they had an M60 machine gun with them to lay down fire while the men retreated. When they got back to safety, they threw their new weapons down and said, “Give us our 14’s back.”

The M16s were jamming because of a design flaw. Once the defective rifles were replaced, the M16 proved to be a superb weapon. “You could fall in mud and come up firing. You could fall in water, grime, and grit and it would work,” Robinson says.

In April of 1967, Marine sniper Rod Lewis flew into Da Nang and soon reported to a sniper platoon at Headquarters Company, First Marines. For the first few weeks, he didn’t do much. He was assigned to security details and helped load choppers with equipment. In early May of 1967, he was assigned to a sniper team as an assistant. Snipers normally operated in teams of two. The team leader carried the sniper rifle and a .45 handgun. His assistant carried an M16. The sniper rifle was not good in a firefight, but an M16 could provide the Marines with covering fire. Rookies were teamed up with other snipers who had been in country for a while. Lewis was partnered with Ray Lardy, a salty Texan.

Lewis and Lardy were sent to First Battalion First Marines where they were attached to Charlie Company. At the time, Charlie Company was located at the Mud Flats. The Mud Flats was a large piece of fairly flat terrain covered with red dirt – usually mud because of the frequent rains. Company HQ was located in a “hooch,” which was a small building. Several tents surrounded the hooch, and Lewis’ sniper detachment was located in one of those tents. The compound was surrounded by a 10-foot wall of dirt called a “berm.” Since the area was flat, the berm offered the Marines a degree of protection from enemy attack. The area outside the berm had been declared a “free-fire zone,” so the local Vietnamese had been warned that if they ventured into the area, they might end up dead.

Snipers were attached to the units making daily patrols. Lewis learned a lot from Lardy and the other salts: when to stay still, when to move, how to come back from a patrol alive. Lewis also noticed that he stood out from the salts. Their jungle utilities were faded and practically colorless. Their boots were worn. Lewis, on the other hand, was walking around in fresh green jungle utilities and brand new boots. The salts gave him a hard time, but they would always take care of him if he needed anything.

It wasn’t long before another veteran’s experience would save

Lewis' skin. Lewis was soon partnered with Mike McKean, a big, easy-going southerner from Alabama who had played a year of football at Auburn University. McKean and Lewis were attached to Charlie Company when the entire unit was participating in a "hammer and anvil" maneuver: one group of Marines would sweep an area to drive the enemy into another group of Marines. The sweeping Marines were the "hammer"; the waiting Marines were the "anvil." On this mission, Charlie Company set up on one side of a village as the anvil.

McKean and Lewis took a position along a riverbank that rose about 10 feet. As the two men crept along, McKean crawled to the top of the bank to see if he could locate the enemy. Suddenly he came flying down to Lewis and whispered, "You've got to see this." Lewis crawled up and saw a squad of NVA or VC, equipped with the deadly Russian made AK47, no more than 10 yards away walking toward the two snipers. McKean said, "OK, I'm going to shoot the leader and you just empty your M16 over the edge, and we'll take off running."

That's exactly what the two men did. They barely escaped with their lives. McKean's tactic was not a new one: Marine snipers were trained to take out enemy commanders. Leaders could be identified by the way they looked, walked, and gave commands. By taking out the leader, the enemy's chain of command was cut off at the head.

In May of 1967, Lewis killed his first enemy soldier. "My first kill was hard to fathom," he says. "It still is. That a kid from Beaverton, Oregon, could kill somebody." But he doesn't regret his decision to fire the shot. "It was my job, and I did it."

It happened at the Mud Flats. Lewis and Texan Ray Lardy were part of what was called a "killer patrol," which consisted of a sergeant on point, a couple of other sergeants as squad leaders, a lieutenant, and the snipers. As the patrol neared a hooch, the point man spotted something. He began to run, firing his M16 on full automatic. The Marines started taking fire from the hooch. Lewis and Lardy spotted an enemy guerilla running across a rice paddy about 200 yards from their position. The soldier reached a line of bamboo trees, but the cover didn't do him much good. Lardy turned and fired through the only opening in the tree line and brought the soldier down with one shot.

As Lardy approached the downed Viet Cong guerilla, Lewis came up behind him with his M16. Suddenly, Lewis saw something out of

his left eye. A man was running out of the tree line toward him. Lewis turned and emptied his whole magazine into the enemy soldier.

When he went to examine the dead VC, he discovered that the man was unarmed – not even carrying a knife. The guerrilla that Ray Lardy had killed was an unarmed woman. Even though unarmed, the two dead guerillas were part of the main VC group that had fired on the men.

Sniper R.J. Jackson also arrived in April of 1967. He quickly learned that he needed to be better prepared. He was partnered with Harlan Carter, an 18-year-old black Marine from Michigan who had already been in country for six months. Jackson looked up to Carter as an old salt. After just a few days, Jackson was already out on a combat operation with First Battalion. Some Army Green Berets near Chu Lai had been surrounded by the enemy and needed help.

Jackson and the other Marines were sweeping forward in a line through a field of bamboo toward the pinned downed Green Berets. Suddenly, Jackson heard the crackling sound that bamboo makes when it's burning. The sound continued, and Jackson looked around to see that he was the only man standing. Carter pulled him to the ground.

"What are you doing?" Jackson asked.

"You dumb shit, we're being shot at!" Carter said.

Jackson had spent many hours on a firing range, where the noise of a round going overhead sounded like the crack of a bullwhip. Because of its velocity, the bullet cracks the air. But he had never heard so many of them going overhead at once. When that happened, the bullets sounded like the crackle of burning bamboo.

The ambushed Marines returned fire. Because Jackson was a rookie, he had been assigned the role of scout accompanying the sniper. He had binoculars and an M16 but only three magazines of ammunition. Within a minute and a half, his rifle was empty. After the battle, he was given fresh ammo, but he quickly ran out of water from his one canteen. The Marines had been told not to drink any water in the villages or wells, so Carter showed him how to pick small melons from the fields and suck moisture from them.

That was the last time Jackson went out ill prepared.

He was struck by the fact that he had 12 months left in country and he was already experiencing heavy combat. After days in the field, he finally made it back to base. He was looking forward to a hot shower.

He was, however, sorely disappointed. A hot shower was a luxury that was hard to find. Other comforts were also rare. In his first month, he lost 15 pounds.

Jackson also had to learn how to handle the stress of his position.

As a sniper, his job was to put a human being into the sights of his rifle and pull the trigger. He was often assigned to patrols that would watch roads and paths traveled by U.S. military vehicles. His job was to take out any VC who were setting booby traps. He now carried an M16, a .45 caliber pistol, four canteens of water, 16 magazines of M16 ammo, and two boxes of match ammo (the rounds for a sniper rifle).

On one patrol, Jackson, Carter, and two other Marines watched a squad of Viet Cong prepare to set booby traps. The Americans were in a secure place in a high elevation and had the element of surprise in their favor. The VC never had a chance to set their deadly explosives. The Marines easily took out all 10 enemy soldiers, Jackson with an M16, Carter with the sniper rifle, and the others with an M60 machine gun.

That night, the sniper squad camped out, and Jackson just stared at the stars, thinking about the human lives he had taken.

"Are you troubled?" Carter asked.

"Yeah," Jackson said. "I'd never done that before."

"Don't feel bad," Carter said. "You know, you're not here because you want to be. If we didn't take them out, they were going to go take some of our buddies out."

Carter's words soon became reality. A short time later, some Marines who Jackson knew were on patrol and got ambushed. Booby traps blew away four or five men. Walking down the path later, Jackson found a boot sitting on the trail. He picked it up and saw the foot of one of his buddies still inside.

His attitude changed. He decided he had to take out more and more of the Viet Cong who set booby traps. He made it his mission: *We're going to get them before they get us. And I'm going to make sure I come back and I'm going to help as many of my buddies come back as well.*

He realized that for every day of every month left on his tour, there was going to be somebody out there trying to kill him.

In his new position as radioman, Steve Kane learned that innocent civilians are often victims of war. One day he was part of a team that called in artillery on a particular area. A short while after the operation, a South Vietnamese man emerged from the forest

carrying the body of his 14-year-old daughter. He spoke with some Marine officials, who recorded some information on paper. Kane watched in amazement as the man was handed some cash. The man took the solatia payment and disappeared back into the forest. It was the policy of the U.S. government to reimburse the South Vietnamese for their civilian casualties, and the man wanted his money.

Mark Anderson was assigned to First Battalion, First Marines and put on the back of a truck headed for Hoi An. Anderson quickly learned what his fellow Marines thought of their allies in the South Vietnamese Army.

On the narrow one-lane road, a Vietnamese soldier pedaled a bicycle standing up while a second soldier sat on the seat. They were short with slight builds. As the Marine truck passed, the Marine riding shotgun in Anderson's truck stuck out the butt of his rifle, knocking the seated soldier off the bike and into the ditch along the road.

Watching the scene, Anderson tried to figure out why the Marine did that. The man would now have a motive to work for the Viet Cong, if he wasn't VC already.

The road to Hoi An crossed a maze of rivers and rice paddies. At night, every American installation was lit up. Everything else was pitch black.

When he reached the battalion rear, Anderson was assigned as an FO for the 81mm mortar platoon that was part of H&S Company. H&S stayed in the battalion rear, while the rifle companies – Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta – occupied the other bases outside of Hoi An.

Anderson checked in with a sergeant and was immediately placed on mess duty for 30 days. As the new guy, Anderson stood out like a sore thumb with his new bright green uniform. He also stood out for another reason. He had yet to be issued jungle boots. He wore tennis shoes. Every day he went to the supply sergeant for boots but was told that none were available. Anderson didn't realize that the supply sergeant wanted a pay-off. "I was walking around looking like a recruit because I wouldn't pay him," he says. Finally some of the other Marines hassled Anderson about his tennis shoes and walked him over to get his jungle boots.

For Anderson, being a replacement Marine in Vietnam was a difficult experience. Right away, the salts start telling him, "You're

going to die." At the time, the battalion was losing a man a day. "I thought back to my high school," Anderson says. "It had about a thousand guys in it. The battalion had about a thousand guys. We lost a kid a year from accident or cancer, something like that. Here the battalion was losing a guy a day."

Other than tormenting him, the salts would have nothing to do with him: "As I was to learn later on, you didn't hang with new guys. They were stupid and they died. That first month in Vietnam was a learning process. It seemed like most of the guys who bought it, bought it right away. They would just screw up. They would stand up when they shouldn't or they would do something stupid. You had to learn to play the game."

On the mess hall wall were scribbled the names of Marines. Next to the names were the number of days each had left in Vietnam. Some of the men had 13 days or 27 days. Looking at the inscriptions, Anderson thought: *Man, I got 380 days.*

Vietnam was also unbelievably exciting for Anderson. He remembers waking up early in the morning to chop ice. Against the pitch-black sky, he saw Puff the Magic Dragon. The Douglas AC-47 gunship was lethal. On board the aircraft were three 7.62mm mini-guns and 21,000 rounds of ammunition. Each mini-gun had two rates of fire: fast, 6,000 rounds per minute, or slow, 3,000 rounds per minute. With seven crewmen (two pilots, two gunners, one navigator, one flight engineer and one load master), the gunship usually operated at three thousand feet without armor or escorts. It also carried flares, which were thrown from the open door.

One of every five rounds fired, or twenty per second, was a tracer. Gunships were often called out at night. When the mini-guns fired, the tracers looked like a stream of fire blasting from the mouth of a monster. It looked like a flying, fire-breathing dragon, which is why the AC-47 earned its nickname from the Peter, Paul and Mary song popular at the time.

Anderson was in awe of the sight – it looked like the aircraft was pouring raw, molten steel down into the jungle.

The fascinating elements drew a sharp contrast to the tragedy and fear he experienced. "The Nam was yin and yang to me. It was the coolest place I have ever been and it was the worst place I have ever been."

After he finished mess duty, Anderson began work as an FO with

the 81mm mortar platoon. At times, he would stay with the mortars in the battalion rear. More often than not he would be assigned to one of the four rifle companies. On his first few assignments, Anderson tried to make friends with Marines in the rifle companies. But no one wanted to make friends with a new guy, especially one carrying a radio. “They don’t want to be anywhere near you because you’re just going to be a target,” he says.

If he did make a friend, that friendship never lasted for long. Since he bounced around from company to company, he might not be with the same platoon again for several months after his initial assignment. When he returned, most of the guys that he had met earlier were gone. “You didn’t know where they were,” he says. “They didn’t tell you if a guy got wasted, wounded, or rotated out. You just got back and there were all new guys.”

Ed Yates was assigned to Charlie Company’s Second Platoon. He was issued a rifle and other equipment and told to wait until his platoon returned from patrol. When he saw the men return, he said to himself: *Oh shit. What have I gotten myself into?* The men were dirty and scraggly with torn jungle utilities. They were tired and haggard. This was not the spit and polish of Camp Lejeune that Yates was accustomed to. That’s when he realized, *This isn’t John Wayne. This is the real thing.*

Yates reported to his squad as a rifleman. That didn’t last long. Every company, platoon and, when conducting squad-size patrols, every squad had its own radioman. Yates had been with his new squad for two weeks when the radio was turned over to him. Yates had never even seen one before. After his squad leader gave him a crash course in radio operation, Yates carried one for the rest of his tour in Vietnam.

Shortly after becoming his squad’s radioman, Yates and Charlie Company set out on Operation Calhoun. The company was in the bush for about two weeks. Calhoun was a “search and destroy” operation that involved a lot of walking. It resulted in a heat rash for Yates and little else in the way of military results. It was, however, the first time that he killed someone.

When Yates’s squad came upon a small Vietnamese village, it began taking fire. The Marines entered the village but didn’t see any enemy soldiers at first. As Yates walked, a Chicom grenade landed

at his feet. The explosion would either maim or kill him, but a few

seconds passed and he was still alive. The grenade was a dud.

"What the hell is that?" Yates yelled to his squad leader, Sgt Richard Toschi, a tall, sandy-haired Marine with a clean-cut look.

"That's a Chicom," Toschi shouted back. "Frag that bunker over there!"

Yates looked in the direction of a hooch. Many Vietnamese families built underground bunkers inside or next to their homes for refuge when they were under attack. Yates grabbed a grenade, went over to the bunker, pulled the pin, and threw it in. He had never thrown one in combat before. After the explosion rocked the bunker, Yates went in to check for casualties. He was shocked by what he found. He had killed two women and a child.

The smell inside that bunker stays with him to this day: "It is a smell that never leaves you: a combination of blood, viscera, cordite and composition B [an explosive]," he says. "That is why movies are phony. They don't have the smell."

The fact that he had just killed two women and a child struck Yates hard. Yet he knew the grenade was thrown at him from that bunker. The dead were enemy soldiers.

In July 1967, Doc Dowd spent about a week in the battalion rear getting acclimated to the environment. He was issued a weapon and his "Unit One." The Unit One contained all the medical gear that a Navy corpsman would need in the field: bandages, gauze, sulfa powder, plasma units, syringes of morphine, antibiotic ointments, and other items.

When a Marine was hit, the main job of a corpsman was to stop the bleeding, protect the wound, and get the man on a helicopter. The veteran corpsmen at the battalion aid station taught Dowd what they had learned in the field. Corpsmen were usually given six months in the field and then rotated to the battalion aid station for the remaining six months of their tour. They were rotated out frequently because of their exposure to danger.

"When a guy gets wounded, everybody else is ducking but a corpsman is getting up," Dowd says. "When a guy got shot, he didn't move himself out of the field of fire. The corpsman had to go into the field of fire to get to him. It's like being a paramedic with no highway patrolmen around to slow the traffic down."

The veterans taught Dowd how to pack his Unit One. Dowd learned that when a corpsman injected a morphine syringe into a wounded

Marine, he put a red "M" – usually written in the injured man's blood – on the man's forehead so other medical personnel would know morphine had been administered. Because morphine is a respiratory suppressant, more than one dose could stop a patient's breathing.

But morphine was given for pain, and many times, a man's wounds were so painful that one syringe of morphine was simply not enough. Corpsmen were instructed never to give more than one dose, but some corpsmen would give a second shot, write the red "M," and attach the two used syrettes to the patient's collar so doctors at the hospital would know about the extra dose.

Dowd was assigned to Charlie Company's Third Platoon. The senior corpsman in the platoon was Mike Noble, who gave Dowd tips on how to survive in the field. He also helped Dowd tend to the men's day-to-day problems: heat exhaustion, dehydration, respiratory problems from the heat and humidity, infections of minor scratches, trench foot from the constant slogging through mud and water, etc. Dowd had to make sure that the men took their salt tablets, malaria pills, and diarrhea pills. Dysentery was an occasional problem, but if a man was diagnosed with a condition like malaria, he was evacuated.

After Field Medical School, Doc Hammergren flew to Vietnam. Like many Marines and Navy corpsmen, he discovered that his sea bag had been lost during transit. He got off the plane in Da Nang wearing his Navy dress blues. The wool uniform made the hot Vietnam air all the more uncomfortable, but he tried to make the best of it. He got on a truck that would take him to his new assignment: First Battalion, First Marines. The truck came across a military convoy that had hit a mine. They needed a corpsman to treat the wounded.

Hammergren had nothing: no medical equipment, no change of clothes. But he found a first aid kit in one of the vehicles and set out to see what he could do. He quickly discovered that most of the victims were dead, lying beside the road and in rice paddies. He did his best to treat the survivors, but as the reality of his situation hit him, so did the fear. He thought, *What is this? What am I doing?*

A military chaplain appeared and started giving Last Rites to a Marine in a ditch. Hammergren felt he was about to lose his composure. He wasn't expecting things to be so intense so soon.

Hammergren eventually made it to the battalion aid station where he was issued jungle utilities, a weapon, and everything else he

would need. That night, he heard strange, foreboding noises emanating from the sky. Looking up, he saw a giant, dark aircraft spewing rounds of tracer fire into the distant terrain. He had never seen anything like it. A haunting roar accompanied the tracers, which looked like flames. The aircraft resembled a fire breathing dragon.

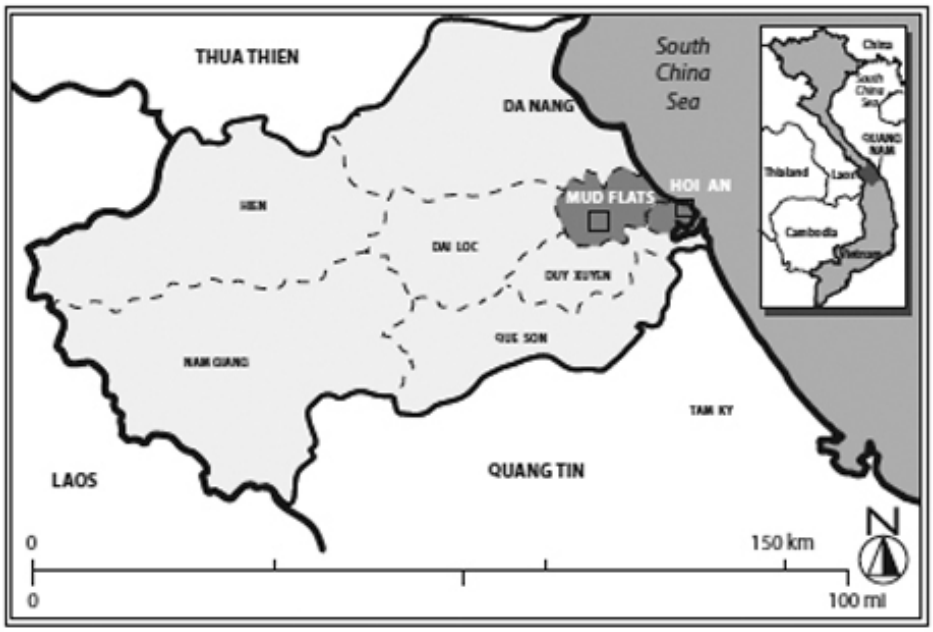
Astonished, he asked a nearby Marine, “What is that?” “That’s Puff,” the Marine said.

“Is it ours?” Hammergren asked.

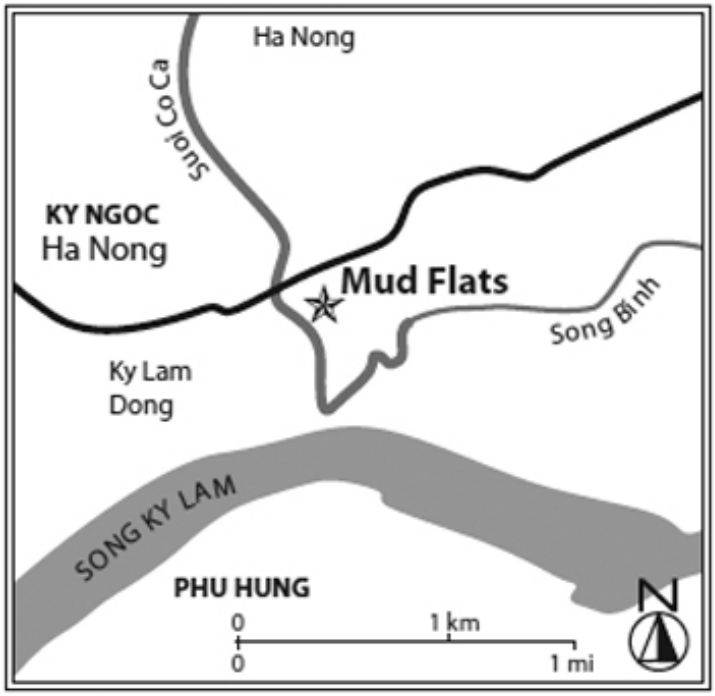
It was, indeed, American. That’s when it dawned on the young Navy corpsman:

He was at war.

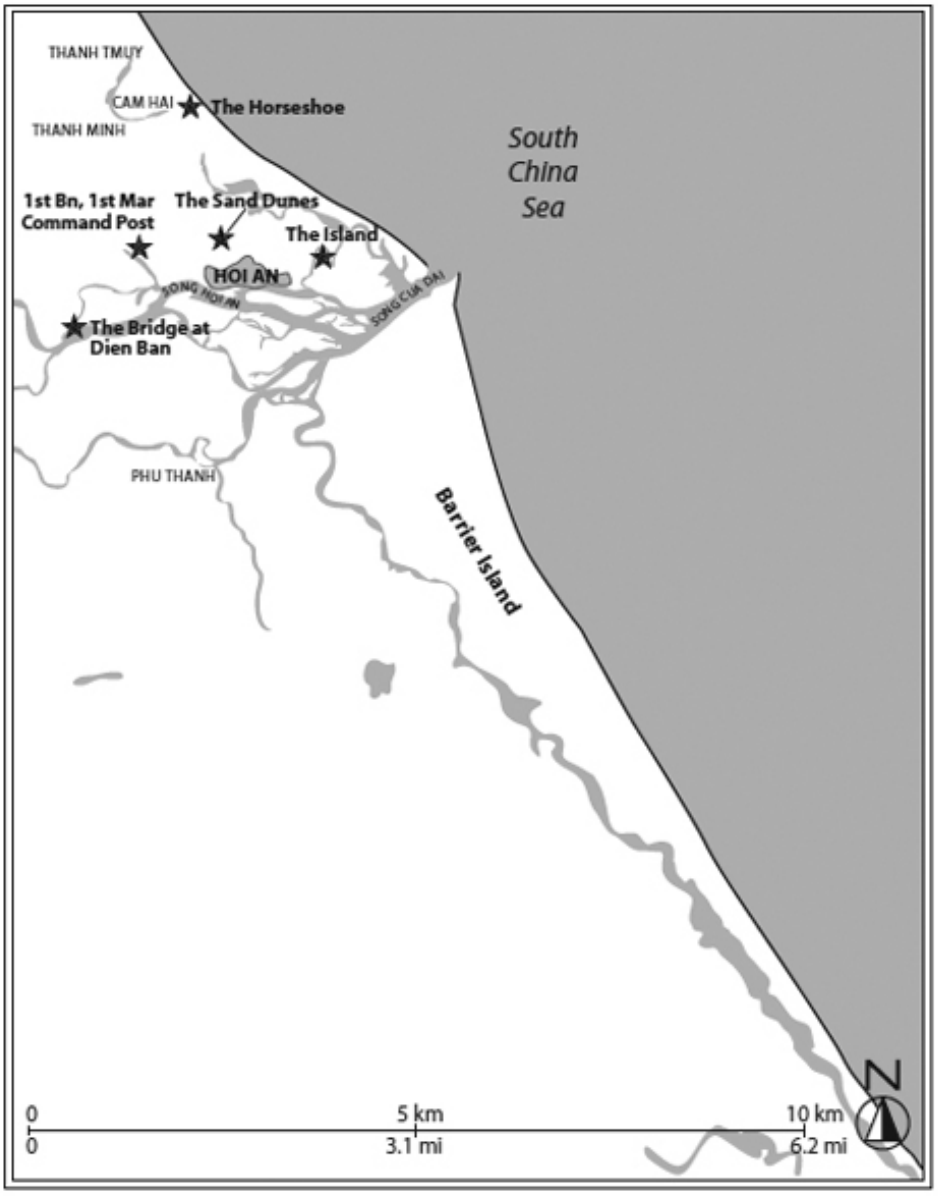
Greater South East Asia 1967



Districts of Ouang Nam Province, Republic of South Vietnam, 1967



Company Patrol Base at the Mud Flats, south of Da Nang, west of Hoi An. Part of the expanded area of operations for First Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, early to mid-1967



Expanded area of operations for First Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, vicinity of Hoi An, early to mid-1967

30 JULY 1967: THE ISLAND

LCpl John C. Gemborys. From Gardner, Massachusetts. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

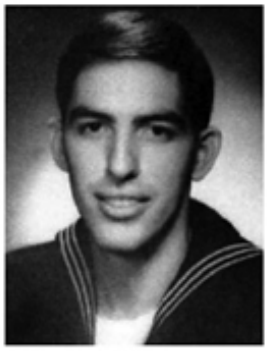
LCpl Victor A. Spadaro. From Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

Sgt Richard W. Toschi. From Renton, Washington. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

1 AUGUST 1967: OPERATION PIKE

Cpl David J. Carlton, Company Radioman, Charlie Company. From St. Paul, Minnesota. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

15 AUGUST 1967: THE ISLAND



HN Clifford K. Coons. From Pomerene, Arizona. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

Pvt Glenn C. Baer. From Reading, Pennsylvania. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

LCpl Douglas S. Dickerson. From Trenton, New Jersey. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

LCpl Gordon P. Eadie. From West Carleton County, Ontario, Canada. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

LCpl Robert A. Kolas. From Beverly, New Jersey. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

In country R&R at China Beach after the explosion on the Island on 15 August. Mike Guyot is seated to the left, Mike LaVallee is seated to the right. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

SSgt James J. McCormack. From Hawthorne, New York. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

First Lieutenant Robert Victor Kemp. Platoon Commander, First Platoon, Charlie Company. From Hot Springs, Arkansas. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

PFC Paul J. McEachron. From Stoughton, Massachusetts. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

Aerial view of First Platoon's PPB on the Island, summer of 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

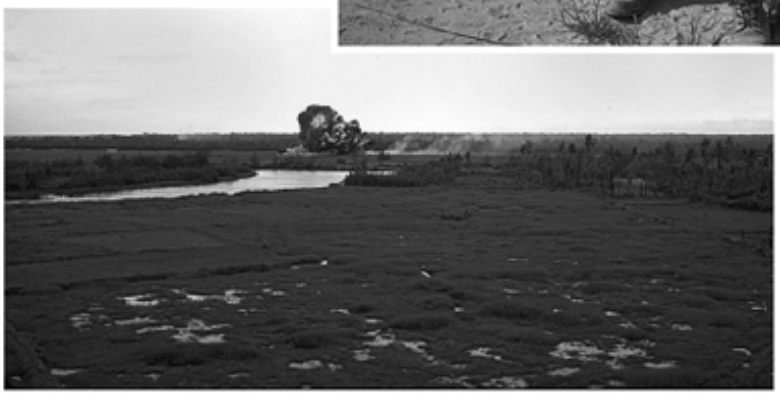
First Platoon's PPB on the Island, summer of 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

First Platoon Squad Leaders Cpl Dave Welsh (first from left) and Cpl Tom Hill (second from left), summer of 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

The Island. The dense brush in the background is the area where the patrol led by First Lieutenant Vic Kemp was devastated by a VC booby trap on 15 August 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

First Lieutenant Ruffer (extreme right) on the Island, summer, 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

Aerial strikes on the Island. First Lieutenant Vic Kemp and First Platoon were devastated by a booby trap earlier in the area where the strikes are taking place. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*



First Lieutenant Ruffer (first from left) and Captain Major inspect captured VC weapons near the bridge at Dien Ban. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

Marines firing mortar rounds from their PPB on the Island, summer 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

First Platoon Marines on the Island. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

First Platoon Marines on the Island, late August 1967. Cpl David Welsh is kneeling in the front row, second from left. Cpl Hugh Helm is kneeling in the front row, extreme right. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

First Platoon on patrol, August, 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

First Platoon on patrol, August, 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

The bridge at Dien Ban. First Platoon, under First Lieutenant Jack Ruffer, was ordered to begin guarding the bridge on 25 August 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

Cpl Hugh Helm (top left), Cpl Mike Guyot (top right), LCpl Ken Chambers (bottom left) and Cpl Paul Beck (bottom right) on the bridge at Dien Ban, September 1967. *Photo courtesy of Hugh Helm.*

Cpl Cobbie J. Bentley. From Birmingham, Alabama. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

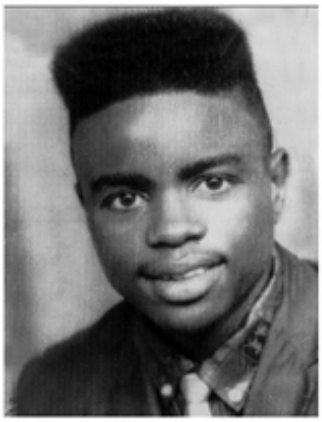
LCpl Mark T. Anderson, H&S Company, 81mm Mortars, Forward Observer Team Radioman, attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Mundelein, Illinois. *Photo courtesy of Mark Anderson.*

Sgt Salvador Bazulto Jr., Assault Squad Leader, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company attached to First Platoon, Charlie Company, on Operation Medina. From Los Angeles, California. *Photo courtesy of Cecilia Bazulto Hamamoto.*

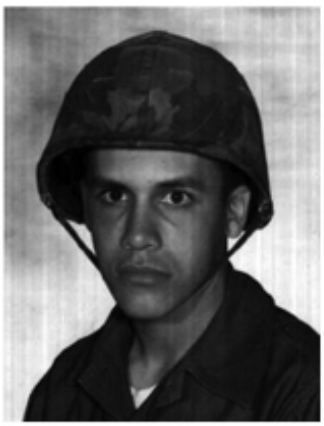
Cpl Quinton Morgan Bice, Fireteam Leader, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. Friend of George Hutchings. From Texas City, Texas. *Photo courtesy of the Bice family.*

PFC William S. Blessing, Rifleman, First Platoon, Charlie Company. From Denver, Colorado. *Photo courtesy of the Blessing family.*

LCpl Karl Bockman (Karl Falster), Machine Gunner, Weapons Platoon, Delta Company attached to First Platoon, Delta Company on Operation Medina. Photo taken of Bockman as a Battalion Scout after Operation Medina. From Charleston, South Carolina. *Photo courtesy of Karl Falster.*



Pvt Oliver Bell Jr., Rifleman, Second Platoon, Charlie Company. From Pompano Beach, Florida. *Photo courtesy of the Bell family.*



PFC John J. Castillo, Rifleman, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Saginaw, Michigan. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

LCpl Michael P. Cole, Assault Section, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company, attached to Third Platoon, Charlie Company on Operation Medina. Part of the "ABC" squad of Antal, Boxill and Cole. *Photo courtesy of Mike Cole.*

Navy Corpsman (HM2) Dick Conklin, Delta Company. From Johnson City, New York. *Photo courtesy of Dick Conklin.*

PFC James M. DeAbre, Rifleman, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Morgan Hill, California. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

Pvt Bradford L. Foote, Rifleman, Second Squad, Second Platoon, Charlie Company. Best friend of John Lee. From Bend, Oregon. *Photo courtesy of Brad Foote.*

LCpl Kevin A. "K.C." Cahill, Rifleman, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Lynn, Massachusetts. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

Cpl John R. Lee, Fireteam Leader, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Creswell, Oregon. *Photo courtesy of Brad Foote.*

Cpl Glenn Griffin (first from left) and Jon Woodard, Delta Company. Griffin is from Warwick, New York. *Photo courtesy of Glenn Griffin.*

Marine sniper David Butt (left) and LCpl R.J. Jackson (right), Sniper Platoon, First Marine Regiment. Jackson, along with Cpl Rod Lewis, were attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. Jackson is from Eagle Rock, California. *Photo courtesy of R.J. Jackson.*

LCpl Michael E. LaVallee, First Platoon Radioman, Charlie Company. LaVallee was the radio operator for First Lieutenant Vic Kemp and subsequently for First Lieutenant Jack Ruffer. From Hennepin, Minnesota. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

First Lieutenant Paul S. Nelson, Platoon Commander, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Petoskey, Michigan. *Photo courtesy of Paul Nelson.*

Cpl Rod Lewis, Sniper Platoon, First Marine Regiment, attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Lake Oswego, Oregon. *Photo courtesy of Rod Lewis.*

William T. Perkins, Jr. (left) and Jim Priddy upon graduation from boot camp, MCRD San Diego, 1966. From Mission Hills, California. *Photo courtesy of Jim Priddy.*

First Lieutenant Jack A. Ruffer, Platoon Commander, First Platoon, Charlie Company. From San Bernardino, California. *Photo courtesy of Jack Ruffer.*

William T. Perkins, Jr. upon graduation from boot camp, MCRD San Diego, 1966. Cpl Perkins would serve as a motion picture combat photographer attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Mission Hills, California. *Photo courtesy of Jim Priddy.*

LCpl Dan Snell (left) and his father Bob in Vietnam. From Charlotte, North Carolina. *Photo courtesy of Dan Snell.*

PFC Roger E. Walton, 60mm Mortar Section, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company. From East Springfield, New York. *Photo courtesy of the men of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

First Platoon on patrol, August 1967.

5 The Day the World Blew Up

As the months passed and the war raged on with no sign of peace, the men who were not maimed or killed were learning how to survive. The skills they developed were acquired by battling death firsthand. Despite their experience, one thought still lay in the back of their minds.

After about six months, Lieutenant Paul Nelson lead his platoon each day knowing that at some point he was going to get hit. He had seen enough combat to know how many ways there were to get wounded: hitting a mine on a road, getting sniped at, getting shot in a firefight, being hit by a grenade, tripping a booby trap. “At that point, you knew that you were going to get it,” he says. “You just didn’t know how bad it was going to be. All along, I knew that I was going to get dinged.” He was struck by the constant carnage and the number of Marines he saw experiencing excruciating pain. “It is horrible to see some poor soul lose both of his legs,” he says. “That is terrifying. After seeing too many of those, I really worried about that – getting maimed and getting to the point that you would never get out of pain, just laying out there forever.”

Nelson and the other Marines simply had to grind it out day by day, night by night. They had to learn ways to handle the stress. The responsibility of his job helped Nelson deal with the tension. Writing home helped. If beer was available, each Marine was allowed two cans a day. Since some men didn’t drink, a Marine could get a can or two more if he was lucky. Unfortunately, beer was not often available. A few men, on occasion, smoked marijuana.

For Jack Ruffer, who would take over command of First Platoon in August, the stress was enormous. Instead of being emotional, he was totally unemotional. He didn’t feel fear or anxiety, nor did he feel excitement or positive emotions. He later realized that his lack of emotion was a protective mechanism to maintain his sanity. Like most Marines serving in Vietnam, he tried not to get too attached to anyone. “If you allowed yourself to get too close to someone and then they were killed,” he says, “you learned very quickly not to get close to anybody else.”

Nelson worked to maintain the morale of his men. Some would feign sickness rather than go out on patrol. Others tried to get three Purple Hearts. A Marine with three Purple Hearts was sent home. A

man might get a small scratch or sprain an ankle jumping off a tank and try to get a Purple Heart.

Overall, the quality of men in his platoon was superb. Nelson credits his success as a platoon commander partially to the high caliber of his men. He remembers Bill Church, a squad leader with good judgment and a lot of guts. He also recalls Mike Church. Church was initially a radioman in Second Platoon. In August of 1967, after Operation Pike, he served as Nelson's radioman in Third Platoon. He was later promoted to man the company radio for Captain Major. "He was smart, had a sense of humor, and was a quick study." Nelson said. "He was a good rifleman and a good radioman. He was articulate, so he would transmit and receive accurate messages. You really need a good radioman. That guy may be speaking to an irate captain or even a colonel. He has to be somebody who can keep his cool and be effective. Mike Church was certainly that."

Doff Edwards and Kevin Cahill were two good point men in Nelson's platoon. They were also best friends. The "point man" led a column of Marines on patrol. He was the "point of the spear." It was the most dangerous job in Vietnam. Edwards was a big, powerful African-American from Louisiana. Cahill was not as physically imposing and was a little gun shy at first. After some time, however, he took to the position. "He really adapted quickly." Nelson says. "He became a good point man."

Not all Marines would make good point men, despite their good intentions. The good ones developed a sixth sense. They were very observant and adept at picking up on booby traps or ambushes. Despite this extra sense, the job was still fraught with peril.

Cahill was one of those who excelled at the job. "He got more experience, and he developed an additional sense about what was out there," Nelson said. "He developed more and more self-confidence. He became aggressive and wanted to be out there."

Nelson continued to develop his men into a stronger fighting unit. When he neared the halfway point of his tour in the summer of 1967, he began to count down the days. He continued to take his duty day by day, accomplishing his mission while facilitating the survival of his men. His replacement was due to arrive in October of 1967.

From April to June, Mike Robinson was a grunt with his squad in Nelson's Third Platoon. In late August of 1967, he became the

platoon radioman. Throughout Vietnam, radiomen were hard to come by. Like corpsmen and officers, they were marked targets. Without corpsmen, wounded men would die. Without leadership, chaos would ensue. Without the radios, men would be stranded without support.

In June of ‘67, Mark Anderson, an FO for the 81mm mortar platoon, had been rotating duty between the rifle companies and the battalion rear. Time in the battalion rear was generally out of the line of fire. All of that was about to change.

On a cold and rainy morning, he was on radio watch. When his watch ended, he prepared to go to Mass. He woke up the Marine who was to relieve him. “Make sure you’re awake,” Anderson said. “I’m leaving for Mass.” The other man sat up and lit a cigarette. Satisfied that the post was attended, Anderson left.

Anderson went to Mass and returned to his post. When he got back, a gunnery sergeant was waiting for him. “I need to talk to you now” the man said.

When the two men were alone, the sergeant cold-cocked Anderson with a fist across his face. Anderson was sent sprawling to the ground. The gunny accused him of leaving the radio unattended. Anderson’s relief had gone back to sleep. Anderson told his side of the story, but to no avail. The gunny told him, “Get your gear. You’re going to the bush.”

Anderson was assigned a rotating duty between the three rifle companies for the remainder of his tour.

In Anderson’s job as an 81mm FO, he would accompany rifle companies or one of their subordinate platoons to the field, staying near the lieutenant or other commander. “My job was to hold a map in one hand, a compass in the other, and know exactly where I was,” he says. “If you call in a mortar concentration on something, you better not call it in on yourself. That could happen real easy.”

To assist the platoon, Anderson would call in the 81mm mortars, which were usually located in the battalion rear. Non-explosive smoke rounds would be called in first to see where the mortars would land, and adjustments would be made from there. At night, he would call in illumination rounds to light up an area. He could not, however, call in artillery. That was the job of an Artillery FO like Scott Camil.

He went out on platoon patrols almost every day. Some patrols

lasted as long as two days. “We were noisy,” he says. “You could hear us coming from a mile away. If the gooks wanted to avoid us, they’d just avoid us. We hardly ever caught them unaware.” The enemy, however, were familiar with the territory. They frequently caught the Marines by surprise. “I always thought that if I could get them in the south side of Chicago, we could screw with them real good,” Anderson says.

In early July 1967, Captain Bill Major took over command of Charlie Company. At about the same time, Lieutenant Nelson’s Third Platoon was located on the hazardous Island, Dan Snell was stepping off the C-130 in Da Nang, and Ed Yates was a newcomer to Second Platoon.

The Island was a small piece of land that was 2000 meters east of Hoi An and 2000 meters west of the South China Sea. It was located at a point where a tributary of the Hoi An River made a tight hair pin bend north and south. The North Vietnamese would use the Island to ferry supplies to the Viet Cong. Covered in thick foliage and deadly booby traps, the place was a free-fire zone. During the day, the Island belonged to the Marines. At night, it belonged to the Viet Cong.

During the month of July, Second Platoon replaced Third Platoon on the Island. During the day, the Marines ran patrols and sweeps (a number of men moving on line through an area). At night, the men would be sent out on scorpions (night ambushes) or ordered to a listening post (LP). An LP was set up at night and was usually 100 to 300 yards outside the platoon or company’s position. The LP consisted of two Marines, one with a radio. The LP provided early warning to the main body of Marines should the enemy attempt a night attack.

The listening post was a frightening assignment for Yates. “Imagination goes wild on an LP,” he says. “A shadow from a bush becomes a man pointing a rifle at you. Every noise was the enemy. We were very tired after running patrols during the day. Your brain was not sharp.”

The two Marines on an LP would take turns sleeping. The Marine on watch would “key” the handset of his radio twice to indicate to the Marines at the command post that all was secure. At times, the VC would hit an LP if they thought the Marines were getting drowsy.

The VC occupying the Island and Sand Dunes continued to be re-supplied from the north by sampan.

One night, Yates accompanied his squad on a scorpion. The night ambush was set up on a riverbank. The area was a key re-supply point for the VC. It was, therefore, designated as a free-fire zone. Any Vietnamese found on the river would be considered an enemy. An hour or two before dawn, Yates' squad heard the splashing of a boat on the river. They assumed that the sound was coming from a Viet Cong supply boat. The squad opened up on the boat, but they couldn't see what they were firing at. The splashing ceased.

The men started to take fire from the other side of the river. Unknown to the Marines, a group of allied Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers was camped on the opposite riverbank. The next day, while on patrol, the squad came upon a Buddhist Temple.

A funeral procession was in progress. As the villagers walked by the Marines, they shook their fists. The boat the Marines had shot up belonged to two local villagers. Apparently, the men had been out doing some early-morning fishing.

30 July 1967

Up north, near the demilitarized zone (DMZ), Marines were more likely to come into contact with the North Vietnamese Army, which operated using more traditional military tactics. The Viet Cong, masters of guerilla warfare, were located further south. The VC were constantly laying mines and booby traps on any path that the Marines might take. The explosives they used were often ordnance stolen or abandoned by American troops, including dud artillery or mortar rounds that had failed to detonate on impact. The salts knew that walking down a path was always a bad idea. On the Island, it was deadly.

Veterans George Dougherty and Ron Coss were well aware that the mission Second Platoon was assigned on 30 July was a dangerous one. The platoon was to conduct a patrol on the Island. The goal was to inspect a small village in the region and flush out any VC they could find. The platoon conducted the patrol in a wedge formation: a squad with the command group in the middle, and a squad on each flank. The squad commanded by Sgt Richard William Toschi was on the platoon's right flank.

Toschi's squad proceeded forward on a narrow trail that was surrounded by bamboo jungle on each side. J.C. Gemborys was on

point. Richard Bazaco was his cover man. Barry Halcus was third in line. Sgt Toschi was fourth in the column, followed by Ed Yates, the squad radioman. Dougherty, leader of the next fireteam, was sixth. Spadaro and the gun team followed. Coss was a few men back. Joe Zorn, from Brooklyn, was second to last. “Sanitary Bob” Headrick, a member of Hell’s Angels in civilian life, was at the tail end of the column. The Marines maintained a gap of twenty feet between each man as they moved cautiously forward.

Second Lieutenant Chet Dombrosky, commander of Second Platoon, and radioman Mike Church were with the center squad. The squads could not see each other because of the thick bamboo that separated them. They maintained contact by radio.

Toschi’s squad approached the outskirts of the small village, which was surrounded entirely by a bamboo fence. The bamboo was thin,

not much bigger than two fingers, and tied closely together. The fence crossed the path that the Marines were on. A gate, also constructed of bamboo, lay across the trail.

The column stopped as Gemborys approached the gate. Rather than maintaining the twenty-foot gap between each man, the Marines bunched up. Less than ten feet separated each individual.

Without thinking twice, Gemborys reached out, grabbed the gate and pulled it toward him. The men heard an ominous “click.”

“Oh shit,” someone said. Then, the world blew up.

Two lethal explosions ripped through the men: one at the front and the other to the right of the column. Hot shrapnel riddled the Marines, tearing through the men at the front of the line. Further back, Coss was flipped into the air. Zorn and Headrick were knocked to the ground.

Gemborys had detonated a VC booby trap. It was probably a “daisy chain” – several explosives wired together and set to go off at the same time. The explosives used may have been dud American 105mm artillery rounds that had been recovered by the enemy. The act cost Gemborys his life.

The giant explosion left a crater in which Bazaco lay screaming. His legs were gone. Gemborys lay nearby, dead. Barry Halcus, who had been third in line, lay with one leg demolished from the blast. Sgt Toschi was dead. Victor Spadaro, a machine gunner from Philadelphia, was wounded and later died from his injuries. Blood poured from the ears of some survivors. The blast had punctured

their eardrums. Yates and Dougherty were not wounded, but the two men behind them were, one severely.

Farther back, Sanitary Bob yelled at Zorn: “What’s that?” As he spoke, a piece of shrapnel about six inches in diameter landed to their right. The two sprinted up to the front to help the wounded.

At first, Yates couldn’t hear anything. The constant ringing in his ears deafened him to the outside world. Suddenly, bullets started to strike nearby: snipers were firing at the survivors. Yates got on the radio and screamed for help. Radioman Mike Church came crashing through the bamboo to call in a medevac.

“I was never so happy to see Mike Church,” Yates says. “I was in shock. I couldn’t hear. The smell of blood, explosives and death was there. Bazaco was screaming. Seven men were down.”

Dougherty was in shock at the carnage. He seethed with frustration. At least in battle, the Marines could fight back. With a booby trap, there was no one to fight, no way for the survivors to avenge their fallen comrades.

Second Lieutenant Dombrosky arrived with the formation’s center squad and quickly set up a defensive perimeter. Corpsmen began to work on the wounded. One Marine had severe flash burns on his leg and the skin was shredded. After the leg was covered in bandages, the corpsman told Yates to urinate on the leg. Urine was sterile, and the burned skin had to be kept moist if the man was to have a chance of saving his leg.

Coss was stunned by the scene. Bazaco’s legs up to his knees were still in his boots, blown away from his body. Bazaco screamed for a corpsman, and Doc Hammergren rushed over and gave him a shot of morphine.

Somewhat calmer, Bazaco looked over to Coss. “Hey Coss,” he said, “will I be able to boogaloo at Circus Circus?”

“Sure, Bazaco, yeah,” Coss said.

The corpsmen did what they could for the wounded. While they worked, the platoon cut out a rudimentary LZ in the bamboo jungle. The task was fraught with peril. The men had to step in each other’s footprints to avoid setting off another booby trap or mine. Finally, the medevacs were able to land. All of the dead and wounded were lifted out by helicopter.

Two days later, the dead and seriously wounded men from Second Platoon were replaced. Some of the replacements were fresh from

the States; others were re-assigned from other units. The two wounded men who were last in the column returned to duty. For a brief time, George Dougherty took over Sgt Toschi's position as squad leader.

Lieutenant Colonel George E. Petro, commander of First Battalion, ordered several consecutive days of air strikes to clear the booby traps on the Island, but the place was far from safe.

Ron Coss was deeply affected by the episode. Even though he was not a religious person and not Catholic, he attended Mass right after the ill-fated patrol.

"I was scared out of my wits," he says. The attack made him realize how close he was to death. "It was just day to day. You didn't know if you would be alive tomorrow."

Coss and the other survivors of the blast didn't have much time to reflect on their loss. Two days later they were sent out on Operation Pike.

Here dead lie we because we did not choose to live and shame the land from which we sprung;
Life to be sure is nothing much to lose, but young men think it is, and we were young.

—A.E. Housman

6 The Summer of ’67

In May and June of 67, the oppressive heat returned to Vietnam.

Some men would try to keep the heat at bay by removing the fiberglass plates from their flak jackets. Others preferred the extra protection, even though it meant enduring almost unbearable temperatures.

Captain Bill Major arrived in Vietnam in early July. Like every other Marine, he flew into Da Nang not knowing what to expect. Like the others, he saw haggard Marines waiting to board the plane and felt a sense of foreboding.

He was driven to division headquarters. He still had no assignment, even though he had requested command of a rifle company instead of a reconnaissance unit. He went to the officer’s club. After a short time, an enlisted Marine armed with an M16 and wearing a helmet and flak jacket entered. He asked for Captain Major. “I’m here to take you down to the First Marine Regiment.” he said. Major followed the Marine out the door. There he had his first realization of where he was. The waiting jeep had been punctured by several bullet holes. “I brought a flak jacket and a helmet for you,” the lance corporal said. “We might take some shots from here to there.”

Major arrived safely at the First Marine Regiment late that afternoon. He met the regimental commander, Colonel Bell, a well-known combat leader with the nickname “Ding Dong.” Colonel Bell told Major that he was assigning him to the First Battalion, First Marine Regiment and to make himself comfortable at a nearby hooch. He said that Major could watch a movie. “First thing tomorrow morning, we’ll send you down to Battalion.” Bell said.

Major had quit smoking two years before. But as soon as he left Bell, he bought a carton of cigarettes. As he lit the first one, he promised himself, “If I make it through the year, I’ll quit the last thirty days before I leave country.”

He woke the next morning to the sound of doves. The sun was rising. It was the most beautiful part of the Vietnamese day. First light was creeping over the landscape, the air was cool and moist, and the doves were singing. Major thought, *Jesus, what a pretty place.*

He was surprised when he arrived at the Battalion Command Post – it was nothing like the solid fortress he had pictured. The Battalion CP was located about two and a half miles northwest of the city of

Hoi An. The CP consisted of a number of tents built on a large sand dune. Sandbags and barbed wire formed the base's perimeter defense. It wasn't long before the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel George Petro, sent for Major. Petro gave Major command of Charlie Company, 1/1 – just the assignment Major wanted.

First Battalion's TAOR (Tactical Area of Responsibility) was in the vicinity of Hoi An, located about 25 miles southeast of Da Nang. The battalion's operational procedure was to rotate its companies between positions within its TAOR: H&S (Headquarters and Service Company) and one rifle company at the Battalion CP, one rifle company at the Mud Flats, one at the Horseshoe and the other at the Sand Dunes. The rifle company at the Sand Dunes usually positioned one of its rifle platoons at the hazardous Island. The platoon patrol base on the Island was only large enough for one platoon and its attached crew-served weapons.

It was late afternoon when Major arrived at the company CP to relieve First Lieutenant C. W. Sooter. The Company CP was located at the Sand Dunes with Second Platoon, just outside Hoi An. On 1 April, Sooter had taken over command of Charlie Company from Captain Marshall Carter, recipient of the Navy Cross on The Raid. Captain Major's first day as commander of Charlie Company was July the Fourth.

The first person Major met was the company gunny. Gunnery Sergeant Brown rotated out about a month later and was replaced by Gunnery Sergeant Thompson. Thompson had previously served as the gunnery sergeant for Charlie Company under Captain Marshall Carter. Thompson was tall, lean, and mean. Major was very impressed with the abilities of both men.

The gunnery sergeant is not the senior enlisted man in a rifle company. The first sergeant is the senior enlisted man; the "gunny" is second in line and has a "hands-on" job. He is a jack-of-all-trades, a doer, the one who gets things done.

Image one 1

The morning after he arrived, Major called for the company jeep from the battalion command post. He wanted to check out Lieutenant Nelson's Third Platoon at the Island. But Major didn't make it out to the Island that day. On its way out to pick up the Captain, the jeep struck a mine. When Major heard the news, he thought, *Damn! My first full day as company commander and I lose my jeep to a land mine!* That incident got his attention. Were the VC aware of the change in command? Were they trying to take out the new CO before he got started?

Major spent his first week becoming familiar with the operations side of the command structure. He learned how the command bunker operated. He accompanied different rifle companies as an observer. He accompanied platoons when they went out on patrol. Everything was designed to help prepare him for his role as commander of a rifle company in the field.

Each company operated differently, depending on the company commander and the unit's location. The companies operated from company patrol bases: semi-permanent positions with tents, sandbags, and barbed wire. From the base, platoons, squads, and fireteams were sent on daily patrols. At night, listening posts were set up and scorpions sent out.

Major spent three days at each base with the company commander, asking how he operated, how he set up his patrols, how he set up his communications, what he would do if one of his patrols got hit, how would he respond to various combat situations, etc. It wasn't long before Major was out on his first squad size patrol as an observer.

That patrol was Major's baptism of fire. The men hadn't traveled more than 100 yards outside the Marine perimeter when the point man stepped on a mine. The explosion blew off the Marine's leg. Major was impressed with how efficiently the squad leader set up a perimeter defense and called in a medevac chopper.

An hour later, the squad was ambushed. When the firing began, Major's immediate response was to take cover. "I hit the deck while the squad leader was standing and pointing out to his men what to do," Major says. "He was the last to take cover. He knew, and at the time I didn't know, that there wasn't any fire coming close to him." A Marine's first lesson in combat is to learn when bullets are close and when they aren't. "When a bullet is coming close to you, it's breaking the sound barrier and it's popping," he says. More distant rounds

don't make the popping sound.

Major was also able to learn from Lieutenant Nelson, commander of Third Platoon. Since Nelson already had some experience "in country," he was able to help the new commander adjust to his new role as CO: "When he first got there, he had not been involved in calling in artillery missions, reading maps, etc.," Nelson says. "We worked together well on that." Nelson liked Major's leadership style. "He felt good enough about himself to seek out the opinions of others. He was above being a totally directive leader. That was somewhat unusual. The battalion commanders were not like him. They were more directive and less likely to consider different viewpoints."

"The 'Skipper' set a good example, and he handled senior officers very effectively," Nelson continues. "He would stick up for himself and for his junior officers. He even had an impact on my professional life long after I left the Corps. I learned a lot from him."

Many other Marines under Major's command respected his style. His uniform was always as crisp and neat as possible, and he gave his commands in a distinct manner: in short, rapid-fire sentences with a slight accent that the men couldn't quite place.

By the summer of 1967, many of the men who would be part of Operation Medina were in Charlie Company and learning to work together. Their training would quickly be put to the test.

Operation Pike

On 1 August, two short days after the booby trap explosions that killed Gemborys, Toschi and Spadaro, Charlie Company was ordered to participate in Operation Pike. Pike was a multiple battalion operation south of Hoi An in an area known as Barrier Island. Barrier Island is a needle-like strip of land that stretches along the Vietnamese coastline for 30 miles. It is bordered by the South China Sea along its entire east side; the Trung Giang River along its west side; and a huge river, the Cua Dai, bordered the island's north end. The area consisted of many high dikes, sand, trees, and more sand.

Intelligence indicated that the V25th Viet Cong Battalion had set up a staging camp on Barrier Island. The VC could routinely conduct attacks on Hoi An from that position. The purpose of Operation Pike was to take out that camp and the Viet Cong battalion. Part of the force would sweep across the island, flush out enemy soldiers, and

push the enemy into Marines waiting on the other side, a classic hammer and anvil maneuver.

Charlie Company was part of the hammer along with the remainder of First Battalion. Another battalion was the anvil. The company set out at night, navigating the island/river complex in small inflatable boats until they reached the northeast corner of Barrier Island. The remainder of First Battalion had a safer trip, coming down the beach and crossing the river on amtracs: armored amphibious assault vehicles.

For that operation, Lieutenant Colonel Petro, the battalion commander, ordered that the 81mm mortars be mounted on sandbags atop the amtracs. The idea was to create mobile 81mm mortars. In the mortar platoon, George Boze was skeptical of the plan. The weapon now sat about 12 feet in the air, an easy target for enemy snipers.

As Operation Pike began on 1 August, Boze found himself flying through the sand dunes on top of an amtrac. Wearing about 50 pounds of gear, he was kneeling, trying to hold onto 100 pounds of mortar equipment so it – and he – didn't get thrown from the fast-moving vehicle. "If you have ever tried to hold onto a bucking bronco bare naked, you'll understand," he says. "We were hoping and praying that they didn't stop this thing too fast."

The night before, Ed Yates and George Dougherty climbed into a rubber boat with other Marines from their squad. It wasn't long before they realized that there was only one paddle per boat. The men had to paddle with their rifle stocks to make the boats move faster. Finally, at first light, the company prepared to cross the last and widest portion of the river to Barrier Island.

Across from them, on the island, lay a small village. In the village was a Catholic church. As the Marines stepped into the rubber boats to cross over, the church bell began to ring. The VC knew the Marines were coming.

As they made the crossing, Captain Major thought they would be ambushed. The Marines were vulnerable in the clumsy, eight-man boats. Yet not one round was fired. Charlie Company successfully landed on Barrier Island and moved forward, prepared for enemy contact. All was calm until about two in the afternoon.

The men started to sweep a long, straight stretch of land that was open in the middle with foliage on the edges. Ed Yates was on the left

flank, walking on the edge of a tree line with the other members of Second Platoon's second squad, including Dougherty, Brad Foote, and Cpl William Riddle. Sgt Warf, a man unknown to the squad, was their new leader. The squad drifted ahead of the rest of Charlie Company.

"Hold up," Yates heard over his radio. "Wait for the rest of the company to catch up."

Cpl John Brittan, one of the squad's fireteam leaders, jumped down into a small ravine on the edge of the tree line, out of sight of the other men.

For a moment, there was silence.

"Hey! What're y'all diggin?" Brittan yelled. No answer.

Then, the unmistakable bark of an M16 cracked the air.

The squad rushed into the ravine. They saw Brittan, weapon in hand, looking down on two dead Vietnamese in khaki uniforms. The men had been digging a hole in the side of the ravine, and for a moment Brittan thought that they were Americans.

As a result of Brittan's contact with the enemy, Sgt Warf ordered his men to make a sweep of the tree line. Crossing through the trees, the squad came to a dried rice paddy, a large shallow depression with an earthen dike on each side. They started to sweep toward the dike opposite them. The men were about half way to the dike when the entire area exploded with enemy fire. Enemy soldiers were dug in on the far side of the rice paddy, waiting for the Marines to draw closer.

The squad hit the ground as rounds flew over their heads. Before Yates could fire, his rifle was shot out of his hands. Some rounds hit so close they kicked dirt around the men. One round went through the jungle kit attached to Yates' belt. (A jungle kit contained a battle dressing, a small bottle of halizone tablets, insect repellant and other items a Marine might need. Halizone tablets were used for water purification).

Over the radio, Major shouted, "What the hell's going on?"

"I don't know," Yates said. "Someone's shooting at us." He noticed the other men in his squad were doing a belly crawl to a nearby dried- up water buffalo wallow, and he crawled after them.

"Can you extract? Can you extract?" Major asked. "No, sir!" Yates shouted.

Yates reached the hole, rolled in, and fell on someone.

"Get that thing off of me," the Marine yelled. Yates looked up and

realized he was facing the direction of the enemy fire, so he scooted to the near side of the hole where the other Marines were. The wallow was partially dried up, but the rounds hitting the edge of the wallow above the men's heads splattered mud down on them. The squad had run into the well-fortified, dug-in position of the V 25th Viet Cong Battalion. The Marines were less than 100 yards away when the enemy opened fire. The entire squad was trapped.

Yates explained to Major where the wallow was.

"Hold tight!" Major said. "The company is on its way."

Like we're going anywhere, Yates thought, looking at the other Marines hugging the walls of the small depression, making themselves as flat as they could. Someone in the squad raised his rifle over the edge of the wallow and started firing back toward the enemy.

"God damn, stop that shit!" someone else yelled, pulling the Marine down. "You might piss them off even more!"

When the enemy opened fire, Charlie Company was moving forward with three platoons on line. A wide, open desert area separated First and Second Platoons from Third Platoon. Major's command group was with First and Second Platoons. The VC hit the front platoon with a clever strategy: waiting until the Marines were almost on top of the enemy position.

"This was a VC tactic that they had learned long before I had gotten there," Major says. "They realized if they let you in nice and close, it is difficult for you to call in supporting arms such as air strikes, artillery, and your own mortars on them."

The engagement was Major's first real combat. Until then, he and his men had been dealing with booby traps and long-range sniper fire. Usually, the rounds were not well aimed. Operation Pike was different. It was the first time he saw the enemy.

As First Platoon and the two squads from Second Platoon moved toward the tree line in the direction of the stranded squad, they came under heavy fire. The enemy started to pour it on full strength and attack from new locations. A few Americans got hit. Marines grabbed the wounded and pulled them into a large, sandy bomb crater. The men in the crater radioed Major: "We have some critically wounded! They're going to die if they don't get out soon."

First and Second Platoons were still 200 yards from the stranded

squad. Now two groups of Marines were pinned down under heavy enemy fire.

Major reacted quickly: “In combat, you don’t have much time to think other than, ‘What do I want to do to overcome this obstacle?’ It is a reflex action.” As soon as his men got hit, he called for Third Platoon to provide reinforcement while he tried to extract the wounded.

Major and his radioman, Cpl David Carlton from St. Paul, Minnesota, had taken cover in a tree line. Carlton had taken off his radio. The company was fully engaged with the enemy, and small arms fire raked through a wide clearing that separated the men from the Marines in the crater. Major made a decision. He knew he might get shot, but he had to put himself in the line of fire to assess the situation in the crater.

“Corporal Carlton, stay here,” he ordered. “I’ll be right back.” Major broke from the tree line and ran for the crater. Carlton followed, despite the order to stay behind.

The bomb crater was large. Major wasn’t exactly sure where the wounded men were, so he paused at the top edge to make sure he didn’t fall on wounded Marines. When Major saw the Marines, he slid down. Right behind him, Carlton stopped while Major paused. Carlton stood poised at the top of the crater. When Major realized he was there, the Captain turned and yelled, “Get down! Get down!”

Major saw the bullet hit Carlton just below his flak jacket, square in the stomach. He pulled Carlton down into the crater. “Oh, that hurts. That hurts,” the young man said.

Carlton quickly lost consciousness. Major took him into his arms and began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. A call was made back to the rest of the company. Volunteers were needed to retrieve Carlton and get him to a corpsman as fast as possible. Joe Zorn, Norman “Short Round” Ezarnack and a third man volunteered. “We had to go over a dike and down in the crater to get him,” Zorn says. “We were totally exposed to enemy fire. That was the longest 20 or 30 feet I ever had to run.”

The three men made it to the crater, picked up Carlton and ran back to the main line. “We just did what we thought somebody would do for us,” Zorn says. “At the time, we didn’t know that he was already dead.” David Carlton, age 20, had died in Captain Major’s arms. Carlton had followed Major out to the bomb crater to help his

wounded comrades.

Shortly thereafter, Nelson's Third Platoon arrived. The men had to traverse the clearing that Major and Carlton had just crossed. Covering fire from Marine artillery was called in and then, the men of Third Platoon charged toward the tree line, firing as they ran. "That was a very proud moment for our men." Nelson recalls. Third Platoon successfully reinforced First and Second. For the time being, Charlie Company's line was secure.

At about the same time, crouched in their water buffalo hole, Yates and the other men began to notice that bullets were coming at them from the rear. The stranded squad was now caught in a deadly crossfire: from the enemy in front and Marines behind. Mortars flew back and forth. "We were spectators caught in the middle," Yates says. Hours passed, and the battle still raged. The men in the hole were forced to stay put.

Despite the enemy fire, the Marines in the open area near the bomb crater were able to pull back from their position about 100 yards. At dusk, the fire slackened off. The Marines consolidated their position and dug in for the night.

During the six-hour battle, Major had to make many crucial decisions. One was to expand the Marine perimeter by sending Paul Nelson's squads to secure the many surrounding dikes. Nelson personally took one squad toward a dike, knowing the enemy probably waited on the other side. By the time the Marines roared up to the location, the enemy was gone. "That was a very smart decision on Major's part to expand the perimeter," Nelson says. "Amidst all that chaos, he kept his cool and made a good call."

Major ordered Yates and the others to stay in the hole until after dark. Then, they were to slip back to the company's position. None of the stranded men slept that night. The constant fear that a mortar round or grenade would hit the wallow kept them awake. After dark and one at a time, the men worked their way back to the company lines.

At first light, Captain Major ordered Charlie Company to move forward. The goal of the operation still had to be met: Charlie Company was to drive the VC into the rest of the Marine battalion waiting on the opposite side of Barrier Island.

As the company moved forward, the enemy line was strangely quiet. The Marines reached the VC's position, only to find that they

were gone. The objective of Operation Pike was to drive the enemy into the waiting anvil force. Under cover of darkness, the VC realized the danger and slipped away.

Despite the ambush, and the escape of the enemy force, Operation Pike was a success. The Viet Cong were forced off Barrier Island. The Marines confirmed that 60 of the enemy were killed, with another 50 probable kills. Four men were taken prisoner. David Carlton was the only Marine fatality.

R&R

After Operation Pike, all of First Battalion, including Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta Companies, was granted a much needed reprieve from combat. The battalion was sent on an in country R&R to China Beach, which was located on the coast near Da Nang.

At first, the men were made to feel vulnerable. “We were not allowed to take our weapons on R&R,” Joe Zorn says. “We all felt uncomfortable without them. When you are in that kind of environment for a long period of time, having your weapon with you was second nature to us. We slept with our weapons. We always had them with us.”

China Beach gave the men a short break from the stress of battle. “It was a pleasant time to be away for a day or two,” Zorn recalls. The men slept in barracks that resembled Quonset huts. After months of C-Rations, the Marines were treated to steak, hamburgers, hot dogs and french fries. They had barbecues on the beach and ate lobster. Most of the men got sick. They weren’t used to the rich food. Dougherty had a chance to see men from Alpha and Bravo who he had served with before Vietnam.

The men also had a chance to drink beer. Gunny Brown, Dougherty and two other men took a six-by to the supply depot at China Beach to pick up the beer ration for the company.

“Gunny, how many men do you have in your company?” the supply officer asked.

Gunny Brown, without blinking an eye, said, “250 men.” He handed the Navy Lieutenant the required requisition slip. Dougherty almost fell off the truck. Charlie Company had less than 160 men at the time.

The officer looked at Gunny Brown. “Are you sure?” he asked. “Sir, are you doubting the word of a Marine Gunnery Sergeant?”

"I would never do that." the lieutenant timidly replied.

The three Marines loaded enough beer for 250 men onto the six-by. "We had a lot of drunk Marines floating in the water," Zorn says. Thanks to Gunny Brown, Charlie Company had more than enough beer for its three days at China Beach.

15 August 1967

After R&R on China Beach, Charlie Company returned to its disparate platoon patrol bases outside of Hoi An. The company resumed patrols, sweeps, scorpions and set out observation posts in the daytime and listening posts at night. The goal was to prevent the VC from infiltrating through the battalion's Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR).

Lieutenant Nelson continued to command Third Platoon. Lieutenant Dombrosky was in charge of Second. But Major had no commander for First Platoon. "I was always shy one platoon commander," Major recalls. "We were rarely at full strength. We didn't have enough officers to go around." Lieutenant Vic Kemp from Hot Springs, Arkansas, Dan Snell's platoon commander at Guantanamo Bay, arrived to fill the gap.

Snell had just been assigned to the rocket squad attached to Charlie Company's Second Platoon. Snell was the A-gunner for rocket man Joe Zorn. "I liked Dan. He was a country boy," Zorn says. "He was the first guy to introduce me to moonshine. He had it sent over from his family. I'm from New York, so I had just heard rumors about it. He drank it like they did in the old days: he'd lift that jug up over the elbow. He told me it was some good stuff. When I drank it, it tasted like rubbing alcohol to me."

Snell and Zorn quickly formed a close bond. "Dan and I were pretty tight," Zorn recalls. "He looked up to me like a big brother. I told him: 'Stick with me, we'll make it through together.'"

A few days after he joined Second Platoon, by chance, Lieutenant Vic Kemp boarded a truck that Snell was riding in. The officer and the enlisted man renewed their acquaintance. They talked about what a coincidence it was that the two of them were in the same place. Kemp asked Snell if he would mind being assigned to First Platoon. "He asked me man to man." Snell remembers. "It was not an order."

Even though the two men had been in the same platoon from

December 1966 to May 1967, the discussion they had in the back of that truck was their first real conversation. Back in the States, in an ordinary Marine platoon, officers and enlisted men did not fraternize. A caste system existed that kept the two groups separate. In Vietnam, once the Marines were in combat, a great deal of that separation disappeared.

Snell told Kemp that he would be honored to be part of First Platoon. As Kemp climbed out of the truck, he said, "I'll see if I can work this out."

Charlie Company's position on the Island was a strongly fortified perimeter defense with barbed wire, bunkers, and trenches. The command post was protected by sandbags, barbed wire, and four or five heavily protected crew-served weapons positions. The fortification was bordered on one side by a river and on the other by claymore mines. A South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) compound was located about a thousand yards away. The location was entirely surrounded by water, although some of the waterways were very narrow. When the tide was up, the men had to travel there by boat.

The area outside of the compound was "Indian country". Enemy strength was unknown. All that was known for sure was that the area had been heavily booby-trapped. The fatal patrol of 30 July proved that. Intelligence did indicate, however, that the VC had been infiltrating through the terrain surrounding First Platoon's patrol base and into Hoi An.

Captain Major decided to send a platoon patrol toward a village on the Island. He had received reports the week before that an enemy battalion was poised to sweep in from that direction. No battalion showed up, but Major thought the enemy could be using the area to stage supplies.

Major gave the assignment to First Platoon and its new commander, Lieutenant Kemp. Kemp decided to conduct a covert sweep toward the village that would ensnare the VC in a Marine "net."

On 15 August, the dawn patrol consisted of just over twenty men, including David Welsh, Arty FO Scott Camil, radioman Mike LaVallee, and Hugh Helm, a Marine from Warren, Ohio. Welsh was an impressive looking Marine. He stood six feet tall, had blond hair and weighed about 180 pounds. Helm had been in country since the fall of 1966 and was looking forward to the end of his tour. But, he

had a bad feeling about this patrol. It swept through a treacherous area. He knew that the Viet Cong were good at finding dud mortar rounds, artillery shells, and other explosives. They were adept at turning them into deadly booby traps.

A clearing of about a thousand meters separated the compound from the bamboo jungle. The clearing had knee-high grass. There was a lot of water and several canals in the area.

Kemp and all three squads from his platoon crossed the clearing under the cover of darkness and reached the jungle right after first light. Their plan was to conduct a hammer and anvil maneuver by positioning one squad as a blocking force (the anvil) and use the other two squads as a hammer. The two squads would circle around and catch the VC by surprise and push any enemy soldiers into the platoon's remaining squad. The success of the maneuver relied on the Marines' approach being undetected.

First Platoon proceeded into the jungle. When they reached the predetermined location for the anvil, Kemp positioned one squad as a blocking force. The men were stationed about five meters apart, forming a line about forty meters long that faced in the direction the VC were expected to be coming from. Hugh Helm was part of this squad. With the other two squads, Lieutenant Kemp then started to circle around to an area thought to be infested by VC. The plan was for Kemp's two squads to spread out into a skirmish line and move back in the direction of the blocking force. The VC would be flushed from the jungle and could then be easily picked off by the men in Helm's squad. But, that didn't happen.

Shortly after Kemp and the other two squads left, the blocking squad started taking sniper fire. Helm wasn't surprised. "It's their jungle," he says. "They live and sleep in it, and it's very hard for us to move around in there without any of them knowing it."

Because the sniper fire was only a single shot at a time and spaced far apart, Kemp was probably not aware that the element of surprise had been lost. Since they didn't have a radio, the anvil Marines were unable to inform him that the VC were aware of the Marines' presence. Then, the inevitable happened. Not long after they left, a Marine in Kemp's two squads triggered a booby trap. Two men were killed, their legs blown off by the explosion. Two others were critically wounded. Mike LaVallee, Kemp's radioman, called in a medevac. The hammer and anvil maneuver was abandoned.

The helicopter arrived and the wounded were quickly loaded on. Then, the jungle opened up with heavy small arms fire. The VC were shooting at the chopper. If it were picked off, the wounded, as well as the helicopter crew, would be killed. The pilot requested that the dead men be carried out of the jungle to a safer location. Stretchers were dropped from the medevac and the helicopter flew off.

Four men would need to carry each stretcher. It would be a dangerous formation. On patrols, the Marines always tried to stay spread out. Now, they would be forced to move in small clusters in order to remove their two fallen comrades. Douglas Dickerson, a tall, black Marine, was among those who volunteered for the task, even though he had been recovering from a prior wound and didn't have to be on the patrol in the first place. The Marines hoisted their fallen brothers onto the stretchers and made their way toward the platoon patrol base (PPB). Helm's squad was positioned roughly between the PPB and Kemp's two squads. When Kemp reached Helm, the three squads joined back up and the platoon began to make its way back to the PPB.

First Platoon started across a small stream, following a trail that led out of the jungle and into an open area toward the PPB. Helm led the column, followed by LaVallee, Welsh, Kemp and the stretcher bearers. James McCormack, the platoon sergeant, walked behind the stretchers. He was a tall, lanky man in his 30s with only a short time left on his tour. The remainder of the platoon followed, bunching up more than usual because of the slow pace of the men carrying the stretchers.

As he was about to emerge into a clearing, Welsh, who was about 50 yards ahead of Kemp, turned back to relieve one of the men carrying the bodies. At about the same time, Kemp also turned to check on the men behind him.

As he turned, the world blew up again.

A Marine may have triggered a booby trap or it may have been a command-detonated bomb. Either way, the Viet Cong had lured the Marines into a trap more lethal than that of 30 July. If the bomb was command-detonated, then the VC had waited until the blast would have the maximum effect. All 17 Marines were caught in the trap.

Welsh and Helm, uninjured, rushed back to the scene. The devastation was horrific. Helm knelt by Kemp. The front of his flak jacket hadn't been zipped shut. His fists were clenched in agony over

his heart. A piece of shrapnel had pierced his chest, and he lay dying in the swamp water.

Nearby lay Staff Sgt, McCormack, critically injured. Both of his legs had been blown off, and his arms were badly mangled. He was lying on his stomach, and somehow a piece of plastic had blown across his face. He was still alive and was trying to get up, but the plastic prevented him from seeing his own condition.

"Would someone get this plastic off my face?" he cried out. He was trying to roll over by pushing with his arms, but one was mostly gone and the other had much of the flesh blown off. Helm knew the man was dying. He thought to himself, *I'm not going to take that plastic off of his face. I'm not going to let him know what the hell is going on.*

Helm moved on to another Marine. The man lay screaming. His leg had been completely blown off just above the knee. Blood spurted from the stump. A corpsman's bag lay nearby; its owner, Clifford Coons, was dead. Helm rifled through the bag and found a bandage. He tied a tourniquet around the stump to stem the tide of blood and he injected the wounded man with morphine.

Welsh also saw Kemp dying in agony. The mangled platoon sergeant lay nearby. PFC Paul McEachron had been decapitated.

Gordon Eadie, a Canadian, was barely alive. One of his legs was gone. The other was attached only by a thin piece of skin. But, for Welsh, the worst image was of Dickerson, who had been blown up into a tree.

"The bottom part of his body was gone," Welsh says. "His eyes were wide open looking down at me just as if he was going to say something. But he was dead."

Welsh rushed over to Sgt McCormack, who was still alive but in great pain. The stumps of his legs twitched involuntarily. Welsh got some morphine from Coons' bag and gave the sergeant a shot. McCormack died shortly afterward.

Many of the wounded and dying men were screaming, some hallucinating. All the noise was drawing attention to their position. An immediate concern was that VC soldiers might move into the vicinity to finish off any survivors. The uninjured men spoke of setting up a defensive perimeter, but there were only a handful of able-bodied men. Mike Guyot radioed back to the base: "We've been hit! We've got a lot of dead. We've got a number of wounded. There are VC moving in."

Seymour and the others listening to the radio leaped into action and went to protect the patrol. Captain Major also rushed to the scene. Kemp was still alive, and a corpsman went to work on him. Major was shocked at the carnage – dead bodies, men with missing limbs. Nearby, the Captain saw four American 105mm rounds. The explosives were live: they had yet to be detonated. The rounds may have been stolen by the VC. They may have been duds that were buried by the Americans only to be recovered later by the enemy. Either way, the American explosives had been wired together in a fatal "daisy chain" designed to kill and maim Marines.

The wounded were hurried to helicopters. But, for most, the injuries were too severe. Nine men were now dead; eight Charlie Company Marines and their Navy corpsman: Pvt Glenn Baer, LCpl Larry Bowman, LCpl Douglas Dickerson, Corpsman Clifford Coons, LCpl Gordon Eadie, First Lieutenant Vic Kemp, LCpl Robert Kolas, SSgt James McCormack and PFC Paul McEachron. The oldest man killed was 30. Lieutenant Kemp was 24.

After the wounded and dead were aboard choppers, Major and the rest of First Platoon made their way back to the Marine compound on the Island. Outside the barbed wire and out of sight of his men, Major stopped and began to cry. His first month on the job had been filled with death. Men under his command were suffering greatly. Gunny Brown was with the skipper. He said, "You know, sir, you shouldn't let the men see you get emotional."

Every man in First Platoon who was not killed or injured on 15 August, 1967 was given time off at China Beach. The decimated platoon consisted of only seven or eight Marines. Welsh used the time to try to come to terms emotionally with what had happened. "I was shocked, hurt, and frustrated," he says. "Over there, those Marines were my family. I wasn't there all that long, but I had become a squad leader. Some of those guys had been in my squad. I had lost them. It hurt a lot. I became very depressed."

Helm says that the few days at China Beach weren't nearly enough to overcome the trauma they had experienced, but the men did their best. Some cried. Some tried to avoid any emotion, and some – like Helm – used the R&R to escape by getting drunk. But no amount of alcohol could make him forget what had happened and that soon he would be back in combat.

Dan Snell, who had run into Lieutenant Kemp in the back of a

truck, had been expecting to be reassigned to First Platoon. When he was told that he was being transferred, at first, he thought nothing of it. Then, he found out what had happened. Replacements were needed for the men who had been killed, including Lieutenant Kemp. Snell was in shock.

Kemp's death brought a new reality to Snell's view of Vietnam. "Lieutenant Kemp was athletic, well trained, strong, a boxer, a real role model," Snell says. "He had just arrived in Vietnam and already he was dead. It made me wonder what this place was going to be like if they could kill the Lieutenant. It was a real wake-up call."

Dan was especially haunted by Kemp's constant warning at Gitmo: "Don't bunch up! One grenade could kill you all!" He felt something must have gone horribly wrong the day Kemp died.

Snell would soon realize that few things in life can really prepare a man for war. "There was such a steep learning curve in Vietnam," he says. "It was especially so for combat officers. Vietnam was not a football game, nor was it a boxing match. The skills that make you good at these sports have to be applied differently in combat. Perhaps he (Kemp) was too aggressive or eager to engage the enemy that day at the Island. Perhaps he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe it was simply his time."

"I think he had every intention of being a good officer and watching out for his men," Snell says. "He wanted to prove himself. If things had turned out differently that day on the Island, I believe he would have learned from it, and it would have made him a better person and officer. Unfortunately, there weren't many second chances at that place."

Snell was assigned to replace LCpl Larry Bowman, the rocket man who had died alongside Kemp. He arrived on the night of 15 August and was immediately placed on the defensive perimeter. He crouched behind sandbags and scanned the dark jungle. Because nine men had been killed just a few hours earlier, and eight others seriously wounded, he knew the enemy was out there in the darkness. Suddenly, someone approached him from the shadows.

"Halt!" Snell said. "Who goes there?"

"This is the Lieutenant," came the reply. "Carry on, Marine."

Snell was surprised. Even on a day that had seen such tragic casualties, the new officer in charge was looking to his men, making sure that they were awake and fulfilling their duties.

“Whoever that Marine officer was, he was learning the ropes from the top,” Snell says.

The Marine lieutenant who challenged Dan Snell that night was Lieutenant Ruffer. Ruffer replaced Kemp on the late afternoon of 15 August. He had been assigned as the executive officer (XO) for Charlie Company. The XO was second in command to Captain Major. The needs of the Corps, however, always come first. The Corps needed another commander for First Platoon.

Rebuilding

Ruffer had just arrived in country after a week in Okinawa. After being told he was being assigned to the First Marine Regiment, he spent several days at regimental headquarters studying the detailed rules of engagement. The “rules” set out the conditions under which the Marines could engage the enemy in combat. He was then sent to First Battalion and from there to Charlie Company.

Although Ruffer began his new assignment amid tragedy, the depleted ranks of the platoon had to be filled as soon as possible. Normally, a platoon consisted of 45 Marines and two Navy corpsman. Ruffer only had one corpsman and maybe 30 men when he took over the platoon.

Welsh liked his new platoon commander from the beginning: “You could tell that Lieutenant Ruffer was a mustanger,” he says. “You could tell that he was a man who loved the Marine Corps. He understood what the Marine Corps was all about. He demanded that we be accountable, he commanded our respect, and respected us in our various capacities.”

Even though Snell joined the platoon the same day as his new commander, he quickly formed a good impression of Ruffer. “I had a little bit more respect for the Marine officers who had also been enlisted men. I felt that the officers who had been enlisted men had more sympathy and empathy and understanding for our role. In some ways, that is why he turned out to be a very good officer.”

Despite his surroundings, Ruffer tried to retain his sense of humor. Lieutenant Nelson recalls a time when Ruffer and his driver delivered the mail to Third Platoon at the Mud Flats, a week before the tragedy on the Island. Normally, the Marines swept the road daily for mines. For some reason, the road had not been swept that day. Ruffer’s jeep pulled up – no one had warned him about the

road. He and Nelson were shocked that no one had stopped him. He told his driver, “If you had hit a mine on our way out here, I’d have never spoken to you again!”

Mike LaVallee was Ruffer’s platoon radio operator. LaVallee monitored the radio network almost 20 hours a day. With Ruffer’s guidance, LaVallee polished his skills at transcribing radio messages and soon was a step ahead of his commander, creating hourly situation reports that needed little more than Ruffer’s nod or initials.

On 25 August, First Platoon was moved from the Island to Dien Ban, an area west of Hoi An on the main north-south supply route between Da Nang and Chu Lai. The platoon was to provide security for engineer units who were building a concrete bridge over a river. VC sappers – combat engineers who advanced with their infantry counterparts – had destroyed an old steel bridge at that location, thereby disrupting the flow of supplies between Da Nang and Chu Lai.

On the Island, Ruffer’s unit was replaced by a platoon from Bravo Company. That platoon was commanded by Second Lieutenant Clifton Robertson from Los Angeles. Two days after Robertson’s platoon replaced Ruffer’s First Platoon and twelve days after Lieutenant Vic Kemp was killed, Cliff Robertson was also dead. One of his men had stepped on a mine. Robertson went to help his comrade and stepped on a mine himself. The lieutenant on the Island before Jack was dead. The lieutenant after Jack was dead. Both men were killed in less than two weeks. “I was getting the feeling that the finger of fate was pointing at me,” Ruffer recalls.

The day that First Platoon arrived at Dien Ban, Ruffer held a meeting under the bridge that was being built. Among other things, Ruffer issued an order that no man was allowed to swim or bathe in the river unless two Marines, one of them armed, watched him.

The Marines protected the bridge at night and slept during the day. A group of Vietnamese Regional Forces guarded the bridge during the day while the Marines slept.

Change in Command

On 28 August, Lieutenant Colonel Albert F. Belbusti took over command of First Battalion from Lieutenant Colonel George Petro. Belbusti, the son of Italian immigrants, was born in Framingham, Massachusetts in 1926. His father made cement blocks by hand while

his mother took care of the couple's three children. The Great Depression was hard on the family. "There were some days that we didn't have much to eat," he recalls. "I can remember my mother making a bread soup. It wasn't really soup. It was water with some olive oil and some Italian bread sliced up and put in it. That was the big meal for the day."

After he graduated from high school in 1944, Belbusti went to Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts under the Navy Aviation V-5 program. There, he was to receive flight training and serve as a pilot in WWII. The war, however, was over before he could serve. Belbusti completed his degree at Holy Cross as an ROTC student and graduated in 1947.

After graduation, Belbusti was offered an officer's commission in the Navy or the Marine Corps. Belbusti chose the Marines. "I chose the Marine Corps because of the glory of it, I guess," he recalls. "As a teenager, I was always impressed with the uniforms, the dress blues. About five of us joined together and we all went down to Quantico for The Basic School."

In July of 1950, the communist north invaded South Korea. Belbusti was ordered to the combat zone and arrived in August. He joined H&S Company, Second Battalion, Fifth Marines and participated in the second battle of the Nak Tong River. After the battle, First Lieutenant Belbusti was assigned as commander of First Platoon, Fox Company. Fox Company participated in the Inchon landing and in the assault on Hill 58 outside of Seoul.

Lieutenant Belbusti was wounded in the leg during the initial attack on Hill 58. He patched the wound with a battle dressing from his first aid packet and spent the night with his platoon on the ridgeline that the company had taken. The next day, after the communists had been removed from Hill 58, Belbusti was ordered to the rear. He spent the next six weeks in a naval hospital in Japan. He would later rejoin Fox Company as commander of the weapons platoon and would participate in the battle for the Chosin Reservoir.

After serving in Korea, Belbusti returned to the states and remained in the Marine Corps. By 1967, he had advanced to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. At that time, Major General Donn J. Robertson, commander of the First Marine Division, gave Belbusti command of First Battalion.

It wasn't long before Lieutenant Jack Ruffer was on the wrong side

of the new battalion commander.

Ken Chambers, an automatic rifleman in Ruffer's platoon, was a tall, wiry, broad shouldered African-American from Richmond, Virginia. He stood just under six feet and spoke with a bit of a southern accent. Sometime during the first week of September, Chambers caught one of the RF soldiers trying to steal his radio. Chambers threw the thief off of the bridge at Dien Ban. The incident caused an uproar. The RF commander complained to Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti. Belbusti ordered Ruffer to battalion headquarters to explain himself and the actions of Chambers.

Belbusti ordered Ruffer to apologize to the RF's commanding officer, despite the fact that the man thrown from the bridge was a thief. Ruffer did as he was ordered, but he still had a problem with Chambers. If the Marine's temper got the best of him again, Ruffer would have to take the consequences. "I sat Chambers down and explained that his actions had the battalion commander all over me and that he needed to use better judgment in the future." Ruffer recalls. Chambers apologized to his Lieutenant for the trouble he had caused. He assured Ruffer that it wouldn't happen again.

Since he was a mustang, Ruffer knew what it was like to be an enlisted man. Rather than berating Chambers, Ruffer adopted a different tactic with the aggressive Marine. A few weeks after Chambers threw the RF soldier off of the bridge, Ruffer promoted him to fireteam leader. Chambers excelled at his new position. On Operation Medina, Ruffer's investment in Chambers would prove to be a wise one.

A week later, another incident would force Ruffer to make an explanation to his battalion commander. The platoon continued to be on 100% alert at night. The men were able to get a little sleep in the morning and a little more in the afternoon. On 16 September, at about 6:00 AM, Cpl Cobbie James Bentley from Birmingham, Alabama walked from the hooch where he slept to the river with toilet articles in his hand. Despite Lieutenant Ruffer's order, Bentley failed to have two other Marines watch him as he bathed. A short time later, he was discovered to be missing.

First Platoon searched the area, but could find no sign of Bentley. A dive team from the First Reconnaissance Battalion was called in from Da Nang. That afternoon, Bentley's body was found under a barge that was tied up on the river's edge. A JAG (Judge Advocate General)

Manual investigation as to the cause of Bentley's death was conducted, the final results of which were laid on the desk of Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti. Ruffer's earlier admonition to the platoon regarding the conditions under which they could enter the water saved Ruffer his command. "A platoon commander is responsible for everything that happens or fails to happen, every act or omission." Ruffer says. "You have to be clairvoyant and anticipate anything and everything."

Second Lieutenant Robert Anderson took over command of Second Platoon in the early fall of 1967. Anderson was 5'10", 170 pounds and had light brown hair. He spoke with a hint of a New Jersey accent. When he arrived in country, he was greeted by a pile of body bags stacked at the end of the runway where his plane landed. It was an ominous start to a fateful tour.

He quickly learned that the reality of war was not what he had anticipated. He expected to be leading a full platoon of Marines. Instead, he took over an under-strength platoon that was down to about twenty men. The platoon had taken a lot of casualties and its squad leaders were inexperienced.

After new men were transferred into First Platoon to replace those killed on 15 August, Dan Snell was transferred back to Second Platoon. As he got acquainted with his new unit, he learned that the war had a certain dichotomy. Vietnam brought men closer together, but at the same time, it isolated them from each other. "You needed people and you had camaraderie," Snell explains. "On the other hand, Vietnam was a very personal, isolating experience. People came and went, and things happened." Even though he was part of a unit, Vietnam was a solitary experience for Snell. "Everybody I've talked to about Vietnam has always gone to their 'own' Vietnam. Where they went, what they did, what they described was different. At the same time, there was so much teamwork. The basic idea of the Marines was to know your mission and use teamwork to accomplish it."

The battle, therefore, wasn't waged solely against the VC or NVA. Another battle was waged inside each and every Marine. "It was about fighting a battle against yourself. It was about facing your own fears, insecurities, selfishness and pain," Snell says.

As he fought the enemy, as he fought the battle against himself, as he sought to accomplish his mission, the Marine had only one person

whom he could trust: the Marine fighting next to him. “I was confident that we would fight for each other,” Snell says.

As each day passed, as he completed each assignment through his rotation – manning the line on perimeter watch, day patrols, listening posts, night scorpions and then back to manning the line – each day became like every other day. After a while, Snell didn’t even know what day of the week it was. He would receive an assignment, and he would complete it. He would then wait for yet another task, and he would complete that.

Snell also learned that being a Marine fighting the war in Vietnam was about being lucky. It was about being in the right place at the right time. “You could be the biggest, the baddest, or the nicest guy in the world and something horrible would happen to you,” he says. “You could be the biggest asshole and make it through Vietnam without a scratch.”

Snell could only hope that he would be one of the lucky ones.

Cpl Glenn Griffin (left) and Jon Woodard, Delta Company, 1967.

In the late summer of 1967, all four rifle companies in First Battalion were fighting the same type of defensive war. Each company had its own TAOR and had little contact with the other companies in the battalion. The overall Marine strategy for protecting Da Nang was working.

The fall, however, would bring changes for the men in First Battalion. The Marines of Alpha, Bravo and especially Charlie and Delta Companies would soon find themselves fighting side by side, brother beside brother.

Dirty Delta

The commanding officer of Delta Company was Captain Jim Gallagher. Gallagher was an Irish Catholic from Philadelphia who started his military career in the Air Force ROTC in college. He grew up in a protective household. His mother, for example, wouldn't allow young Jim to go swimming. She was afraid that he would contract polio. She was, therefore, none too pleased when her son decided to join the Marine Corps.

Gallagher's decision to join the Corps was an easy one for him to make. All of his life, he was aware of communist aggression. At a young age, he decided that the communists would take over the world only over his dead body. When he arrived in Vietnam in June of 1966, he had no misgivings about his assignment. *This is where I want to be,* he thought to himself. *They're not going to take one step forward.*

Karl Falster was born in Sacramento, California, but his family moved to Tennessee when he was an infant. His father flew bombers in the Army Air Corps during World War II, but was killed when Karl was only nine. His mother remarried, and Karl took his stepfather's surname, which was Bockman. The family ended up in Charleston, South Carolina.

After high school in Charleston, Karl attended several different colleges. He found himself in Ohio at the Columbus College of Art and Design when he realized he was just wasting his time and his parents' money. One night, he was sitting at a bar with a friend who was about to get drafted. The friend said, "Why don't you come on down and let's join up together?" Bockman agreed. The two buddies

planned on joining the Air Force.

The men, however, didn't qualify for the Air Force and they weren't interested in the Army, so they walked into the Marine Corps recruiter's office. They sat across the desk from a big, burly drill instructor type who asked, "Now, how long you boys wanna join up for?"

"How long do we have to join up?" Bockman asked.

"Well, your duty is six years."

Bockman looked over at his friend and said, "Hell, if we gotta do six years, why don't we just go ahead and join up for six years?"

The recruiter smiled, got up, put his arm around Bockman's shoulder, and said, "Son, you're gonna make a great Marine, but let me help you out here…"

The recruiter explained that they could sign up for three years under the buddy plan, rather than the full six years. "That Marine saved my life," Bockman recalls.

As the two new recruits were leaving the office, a young man came in wearing his dress blues. Bockman asked the recruiting sergeant about the Marine, and he said, "That young man has just come back from boot camp, and he was platoon honor man." Bockman said to his friend, "I like that uniform. Why don't you and I be platoon honor men?"

The sergeant put his arm around Bockman again and said, "Son, you'll be doing good to get out of boot camp, but you do all you can." That remark angered and motivated Bockman. So, true to his word, he graduated from boot camp in San Diego as his platoon's honor man.

But it wasn't easy. Bockman was a playboy and was drunk when he got on the bus for boot camp. After a nightmarish evening of head shaving and constant demands, he found himself and the others being berated by their new DI in the morning. "I thought that I had died and gone to hell," he says. "I'd never been exposed to any kind of confusion and demands like that in my life. And it was a very rude awakening."

But he survived, and after boot camp, he was given an MOS of 0331 – machine guns. He attended ITR at Camp Pendleton, was assigned to the Fifth Marines for several months, and then got his orders for Vietnam. After combat training, he arrived in Vietnam in the summer of 1967 and was assigned to Delta Company, First Battalion,

First Marines.

On his first or second night, he learned what the next months of his life would be like. The Delta Company compound was attacked by mortar fire. He rolled out of his folding canvas cot onto the plywood deck and scrambled with the other Marines down the aisle between the row of cots and out the screen door. As mortar rounds landed 25 yards from their hooch, the men dived into nearby bunkers.

Bockman thought, *I'm gonna really have to pay attention here and not sleep very much.*

When he was with the Fifth Marines, he asked a veteran of Vietnam how he survived. The man told him: "I never walk anywhere, I always run. They can't hit a moving target."

So Bockman developed a habit of running everywhere in an erratic pattern, earning him the nickname Zig Zag, or Zag for short.

Dick Conklin was born and raised in Johnson City, New York. He joined the Navy at 18 and stayed in for 22 years. He was stationed in Ohio during the war, but he got in some trouble with his CO and got sent to Vietnam. At 31, the corpsman was considered "old" by the young Marines he served with, so they called him "Doc Pop."

Glen Griffin of Hackensack, N.J., lettered in three sports in high school. He considered the Marines the best branch of service because of what the Corps stood for: First to Fight. He had read a great deal of Marine Corps history, especially WWII battles like Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima. Like many other recruits, he liked John Wayne movies and was influenced by the book *Battle Cry*.

For Griffin, however, it wasn't John Wayne who had the greatest influence on his decision to join the Corps. His father had fought as a Marine in World War II. "I saw a lot of his uniforms," he says. "He didn't talk much about the war, but I know that he felt a lot of pride in being a Marine."

When he enlisted, Griffin was only 17, so he had to obtain his parents' permission to join. He was afraid of his father's reaction, especially as a Marine who had experienced combat. His father signed the papers with some trepidation. All he said was: "Hopefully, it will be over soon."

After boot camp at Parris Island and ITR, Griffin was assigned to a weapons platoon and became an M60 machine gunner. He was assigned to Hotel Company, Second Battalion, Eighth Marines. In November of 1966, Griffin's battalion embarked aboard the USS

Guam for a six-month deployment in the Caribbean. The deployment was known as a "Caribbean Cruise." The battalion was the ground combat element of a Navy Amphibious Ready Group that was to train in Puerto Rico, Panama, and other areas. Griffin's company executive officer, and for a period of months, his acting company commander in Hotel Company, was mustang First Lieutenant Jack Ruffer. Griffin and Ruffer's paths would cross again in October of 1967.

It was on this cruise that Griffin met Marines who had been to Vietnam. He asked the veterans about the war, but many were reluctant to talk. "Some of them had mental scars as well as Purple Hearts," Griffin recalls.

But once the men found out that Griffin was being sent to Vietnam, they offered some advice. "They told me not to be a hero and to keep my head down."

After the cruise, Griffin went home for a thirty-day leave. When it was time to ship out for Vietnam, Griffin's father took his son to the airport. "For only the second time in my life, I saw my dad cry. Then I knew I was in trouble," Griffin says. "He hugged me and shook my hand. As I was heading down the gate to get on the plane, he broke down a little. He also quit smoking that day. He used to smoke Pall Malls, probably two packs a day. For some reason, he got strong enough emotionally to quit and he has never smoked since." When he arrived in Vietnam, Griffin was assigned to Delta Company, First Battalion, First Marines.

Last Arrivals

As summer became fall, the last of the men who would fight on Operation Medina were arriving in country.

Combat correspondent Phil Hartranft arrived in Da Nang in September. The first thing that struck him was the way that the people lived. "I couldn't get over the poverty. When we were getting ready to land, we came in right over the city. The poorest area of the United States wasn't as bad as what I saw. They lived in shacks and shanties."

After about two weeks at the Third Marine Division combat correspondent's office, where he was issued field equipment, a pistol, and ammunition, Hartranft was told that he was being sent out on his first assignment: "We're going to send you out on an operation called Medina," he was told. "It will be a walk in the park. It will

break you into the country. You won't be in any great battle. It will be a nice experience for you."

Hartranft was apprehensive about his upcoming "walk in the park." *Maybe they tell that to every new guy who goes out in the field*, he thought.

George Hutchings was settled in as a member of Charlie Company's Second Platoon, when a new Marine walked into camp with a swagger. His pack was casually slung over one shoulder, and he carried his rifle in the other hand. He was athletic, broad- shouldered and confident, as if he were a salt transferring in from another company. Hutchings would never guess that this was the Marine's first assignment since guarding a Hollywood actress aboard the USS Coral Sea.

"Is this Charlie Company, Second Platoon?" Morgan Bice asked.

"Yeah," Hutchings shot back sarcastically. "You must be Charlie's new target."

"I'm behind you all the way!" Bice responded cheerfully, dropping his gear to rest.

Hutchings was glad to meet the new arrival. For one thing, Bice didn't smoke marijuana or cigarettes. He never got drunk, preferring an occasional beer instead. That was a relief to 17-year-old small-town boy Hutchings, who was a little intimidated by the behavior of the older, more experienced members of his platoon. And Hutchings soon discovered that Bice was an expert at surviving in the bush, a trait he picked up after years in the Texas outdoors.

For the quiet and unassuming Bice, life in Vietnam was an adjustment. He appreciated finding a buddy like Hutchings. He often relied on his religious upbringing and managed to find spiritual meaning in the heat of battle, saying he felt God's presence even in the death-filled jungle. Although his faith was an important part of his life, he chose not to preach to his fellow Marines. Instead, he would occasionally make his feelings known in subtle ways. If Hutchings would break out into a string of profanities, Bice would simply smile and say, "God is watching us."

The ABC squad of Dennis Antal, Fred Boxill, and Mike Cole were all on the same flight to Da Nang in September of 1967. Antal and Cole were both anti-tank assault men. They were assigned to Charlie Company's weapons platoon.

Ideally, the weapons platoon had a platoon commander, platoon sergeant and a platoon guide. The weapons platoon in Charlie

Company had none of these. It did have a machine gun section leader and three machine gun squad leaders. Each machine gun squad was made up of two M60 machine guns, a squad leader, two gunners, two assistant gunners and two ammunition carriers.The weapons platoon also had an assault section leader and three assault squad leaders. Each assault squad was made up of two 3.5-inch rocket launchers, two gunners, two assistant gunners, and two ammunition carriers. Each weapons platoon also had a 60mm mortar section, made up of a section leader and three mortars. Each mortar had a squad leader, a gunner, assistant gunner, and an ammunition carrier.

Members of the weapons platoon were typically attached to the rifle platoons that they supported. Because Charlie Company had been operating from platoon patrol bases, each rifle platoon was accustomed to having a machine gun squad, an assault squad, and a 60mm mortar squad attached to it.

The ABC assault squad was assigned to Paul Nelson's Third Platoon. The three men couldn't believe that they were still together. They quickly learned, however, that their assignment to Charlie Company was an ominous one. Many of the Marines they were replacing hadn't rotated home. They had met a different fate.

Cole's first impression of Vietnam was not a positive one. "Everything was dusty, gray and a drab green. It was like you were walking into a black-and-white movie. There was a lot of dust and smoke. You could smell fuel burning from jets taking off."

Antal remembers being in the staging area with about 12 other Marines when a salt who had just finished his tour of duty stopped and looked at the rookies. The Marine paused, then said, "Look around at you guys. Half of you aren't coming back." Antal and the others just laughed.

When Antal, Boxill and Cole reached Charlie Company, the shortage of men was obvious. The three men were put into the front line immediately. A week into his tour, after already seeing combat, Cole thought back to what the veteran had said. Cole wasn't laughing any more. *Man, that guy was telling the truth,* he thought.

By fall, Phil Seymour had been leader of Charlie Company's 60mm mortar section for several months. Roger Walton, a 22-year- old from East Springfield, New York, joined the section in September. At the time, there was a lull in activity, so Walton had the opportunity to learn the ropes of the mortar section before Operation Medina

began. Walton's parents were both Marines. He quickly became proficient with his weapons and accepted assignments from Seymour without complaint.

Seymour's mortar section was shaping up nicely. It included Bill Ewing, a slender blond who was quiet and dependable and Terry Gerba, a tall man who had already been wounded by an enemy grenade. Willie Greson was a reliable Marine who wore his blond hair close with a flat-top and James McIlwain was a handsome, muscular young man with short brown hair.

Mortar man John Gibson came to Vietnam from Ohio. Gibson arrived shortly after Operation Stone and, upon drawing his gear, found that his helmet had a bullet hole through the front rim. He had drawn the helmet of a Marine who had been shot in the head a couple of weeks before. Despite the dire warning, Gibson always managed to keep a grin on his face.

Heading North

In the first week of October, all four rifle companies in First Battalion were recalled from their defensive positions south of Da Nang. The battalion had received a new assignment and the Marines were on the move, although no one knew exactly where. Charlie Company boarded trucks and drove to Da Nang. At the airport, C-130 transport planes waited to fly the men to their new destination.

As he waited on the runway to board a C-130, Dan Snell wondered where the company was headed. As he looked around, he saw his father working nearby.

"I was very surprised and happy to see him," Snell recalls. "He took me to the local PX. I bought all the hamburgers and cheeseburgers they had, a whole shopping bag full, and gave them to everybody in my squad."

Snell sensed that he was being sent on a large, and potentially dangerous mission. He was very thankful that he was able to spend a little time with his dad. The two men exchanged small talk and then word came to load the planes. Snell said goodbye to his father, boarded the C-130, and flew north to Dong Ha.

Dong Ha

Dong Ha was near the demilitarized zone (DMZ), which was the border between South and North Vietnam. In fact, Dong Ha was so far north that it was within range of artillery fired from inside North Vietnam. The Ben Hai River was the dividing line for the DMZ. Dong

Ha was located just south of the river.

The terrain was different from what Charlie Company had been accustomed to. This was true "Indian country," with rolling grassy hills that reminded Ruffer of the California Bay Area near Silicon Valley. The region had fewer trees, rice paddies, hedgerows, and sand areas than Charlie Company's former position outside Da Nang. Also absent were the Viet Cong. This was NVA country. The North Vietnamese had a professional army. They were not terrorists like the Viet Cong.

After landing at Dong Ha, Charlie Company went to "Site X," not knowing what the site was or what their assignment was. Site X was near the town of Quang Tri, in Quang Tri Province. The Hai Lang National Forest was located nearby. Site X was the location of a new airbase that the Seabees were building to support the Third Marine Division. The existing airstrip near Dong Ha was within reach of NVA artillery coming out of North Vietnam and therefore was not secure. That artillery couldn't reach Quang Tri, but American planes flying from it could easily reach North Vietnam. The new airfield would also provide support for the Marine base at Con Thien, which was also near the DMZ.

Quang Tri was cold, muddy and wet. The monsoon season, which starts north and heads south, was beginning. The Seabees had a small compound, but there were no accommodations for the Marines. The men had to bivouac in two-man tents made from their shelter halves. At night, when it rained, the salt's remained dry. They had the foresight to dig trenches around their tents so the water would run off instead of in. For food, the men ate C-Rations heated over make-shift stoves. The stoves were made of empty C-Ration cans containing a heat tab.

Charlie Company provided a perimeter defense for the airfield for about a week. Some of the Marines were sent on daily patrols and ambushes. Cole and some others were put to work building bunkers, half above and half below the ground. For several days these men didn't go out on patrol; instead, they filled sandbags and stacked them around bunkers large enough to protect two or three Marines.

In the meantime, the Seabees were hard at work building the airstrip. Their first job was to clear out the dense foliage. It was the first time Cole saw Agent Orange in action. When he saw the low-flying planes, he thought they were dropping off supplies. "They

would fly just above the trees, and we would get sprayed," he says. "Since I was from Florida, I thought it was a mosquito spray. In a couple of hours, you could see the foliage start to wilt. At that time, we didn't know what that stuff was. A few days later, bull dozers came in and pushed the dead foliage off into the woods."

Jack Ruffer had yet to have the opportunity to maneuver his platoon in the field. Restrictions had been placed on the unit after Kemp and the other Marines were killed, but he was anxious for an opportunity. He believed the experience would save Marine lives and improve the results of any tactical maneuver assignment given to First Platoon.

"Point, rear guard, connecting files, flank security: these were all things that a platoon needed to know and practice," he says. Ruffer volunteered his platoon for nearly every patrol that came up: daytime, night-time, a couple of times a day. "This gave me a chance to take my platoon out so that I could see them in open country. I could teach them to expand and contract connecting files depending on the terrain we were going over." For Ruffer, it was vital that his platoon knew how to operate in the field. He had to know that the platoon's flank security was actually providing protection for both flanks and that the rear guard was providing security in the rear. The only way to teach these skills properly was through practice and experience.

Some of his men were not happy. They felt that he was exposing them to more than their fair share of danger. His resolve, however, was clear: "If my men weren't trained, I could take Girl Scouts to the field with the same result. These were Marines, but they had not trained as a team, and you learn to train as a team. We had not really operated as a platoon; we had operated as three independent squads, but not as a platoon."

Ruffer's plan soon paid off. First Platoon found itself as the lead platoon on a two company, one day operation. Charlie Company would be the hammer. The second company was the anvil. Hours into the operation, shots rang out.

Ruffer dropped to one knee and quickly heard his men say, "We got 'em! We got 'em." He ran over to the right side of the formation and saw the bodies of about half a dozen dead NVA.

The enemy had been planning to ambush the platoon when it ventured into their kill zone. Two of Ruffer's Marines in the

connecting file on the right side of the platoon formation had taken out the group before they could spring their trap. “I knew that I had made the right decision in exercising my people because we learned how to work together,” Ruffer says.

The members of First Platoon were proud of their successful mission and of their Lieutenant. The next day, David Welsh and a couple of other men wrote on their flak jackets the words: “Ruffner’s Raiders.” Ruffer didn’t care that his men had spelled his name wrong. What he cared about was the new unit spirit, and the new confidence the men had gained from operating in the field as a unified platoon.

That new spirit and confidence would soon be put to the ultimate test.

Marine with M60 machine gun traversing the triple-canopy jungle of the Hai Lang National Forest, Operation Medina, 12 October 1967.

8 Operation Medina

In the fall of 1967, the Third Marine Division was conducting operations along the DMZ between North and South Vietnam, but they lacked the manpower to effectively operate throughout their area of responsibility. They needed help. The First and Second Battalions of the First Marine Regiment of the First Marine Division (1/1 and 2/1) were "chopped OpCon" to the Third Marine Division to boost their strength and capabilities.

One significant enemy base that the Third Marine Division had yet to deal with was in the Hai Lang Forest Reserve south of Quang Tri City. Known as Base Area 101, it was the launching point for attacks by the powerful Fifth and Sixth North Vietnamese Army Regiments. The NVA were well equipped, well trained, and devoted to their cause. They were brave and cunning. The Marines had a great deal of respect for their fighting ability.

Base Area 101 was an NVA staging area, a place where the enemy felt safe enough to build up both personnel and supplies. And the NVA were definitely building up. "There were aerial photographs that showed a lot of trails and roads going into the area," Captain Bill Major recalls. "The NVA were moving a lot of troops in there quickly." From 101, the Fifth and Sixth NVA Regiments could attack the Marine bases at Con Thien, Khe Sanh, Dong Ha and Phu Bai, all of which were not far from the Hai Lang Forest. Another possible target was the air base being built by the Seabees near Quang Tri.

The Marines had to strike before the NVA hit them first. Enemy Base 101 had to be destroyed. In October, the First and Second Battalions of the First Marine Regiment, the First Battalion of the Third Marine Regiment and two battalions of the First ARVN Division were given that task on Operation Medina.

Very simply put, the Marine objective on Operation Medina was to locate and annihilate any enemy forces found in the Hai Lang Forest Reserve. The First Marines' Operations Order 128-67 (Operation Medina) stated in part that elements of the First Marine Regiment, along with elements of the First ARVN Division, were "to locate, destroy and capture enemy forces, installations and logistic supplies vicinity enemy base area 101, Hai Lang Forest Reserve."

The tactic to be used was a familiar one. "Essentially it was a search and destroy operation," Lieutenant Jack Ruffer says. "We would

continue moving in a coordinated effort to push any enemy into the First Battalion of the Third Marine Regiment, which had taken up a blocking position along Route 1. We wanted to know what was there, kill or destroy the enemy, and push any units that remained into the blocking force."

The task would be difficult and dangerous. The Hai Lang Forest Reserve is easily one of the most remote locations on earth. The terrain is mountainous and covered in dense old-growth triple-canopy vegetation, more like a jungle than a forest. Thick overhead branches blocked the sun and cast a giant shadow over the dense foliage below, further limiting visibility. The Marines would have to conquer the ancient jungle before they could find and destroy the enemy.

Preparations

The First Battalion of the First Marine Regiment consisted of the four rifle companies (Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta) supported by H&S Company. Charlie Company would lead the battalion in. Delta would follow. Alpha and the majority of H&S remained at Site X to provide security. Bravo and a portion of H&S would remain with the battalion command group, led by Lieutenant Colonel Albert F. Belbusti, commander of 1/1. The 167 men of Charlie Company would fly into the Hai Lang Forest Reserve reinforced by some combat engineers from Company A, First Engineer Battalion, snipers from the Headquarters Company sniper platoon, 81mm mortar men from H&S Company, a FAC (Forward Air Control) team and an HST (Helicopter Support Team) bringing the total to about 200 Marines. The 81mm mortar men were used as additional ammo carriers for Charlie Company's 60mm mortar section.

Upon receiving his orders, Major briefed his platoon commanders: Lieutenant Paul Nelson of Third Platoon, the newly arrived Lieutenant Robert Anderson of Second, and Lieutenant Jack Ruffer of First Platoon. Major told his platoon commanders that Medina would be a slow and dangerous mission. The men would cut trails by machete, hacking their way forward in a single-file column. Point men would take turns cutting the trail. The units would be strung out through dense vegetation. The men had to be prepared to walk, climb, swim, cut, fight, and survive in the forest for at least a week.

He also told them to stay off the trails. "Trails and roads lead to ambushes," he said. If the Marines took a trail, the enemy could

anticipate where they were going to be a mile or two down the road and could select the best ambush site based on the terrain. On the other hand, blazing a trail through the forest and zig-zagging based on the terrain would keep the enemy off balance.

Despite intelligence indicating a great deal of enemy activity, the Americans didn't know what to expect. They didn't know the enemy's exact strength or location. Each battalion had one or more objectives, pieces of terrain to work towards. If a company made contact with the enemy en route to an objective, the goal was to overcome the enemy and take control of the area.

Charlie Company was to be the point of the spear. As they cut and slashed their way forward, the three platoons would take turns on point. Because it was a slow-moving operation in enemy territory, the men had to be ready for anything. "When you went on one of those operations, anything was possible," Nelson says. "It wasn't like running a couple of patrols or night ambushes. We were going to move quite a ways on unfamiliar terrain. We were expecting possibly the very worst." Nelson and his men were given a three-day supply of ammunition and rations. They were to be re-supplied by helicopter if needed. Nelson expected to be in the forest for at least a week – a long time to be out in the bush. Armed with his .45 caliber pistol, a compass, and map, Nelson would lead his men deep into the heart of "Indian country".

The First Steps: 10-11 October 1967

Operation Medina began on 10 October 1967, when the men of the First Battalion of the Third Marine Regiment took up blocking positions on Route 1 south of Quang Tri. This was the northern edge of the Hai Lang National Forest. The First and Second Battalions of the First Marine Regiment would sweep through the forest toward 1/3's position. Any enemy caught between the two forces would be destroyed. At least that was the plan.

For Lawrence, Massachusetts native Steve Kane, 10 October 1967 was not just the day that marked the kick-off of a major operation. The Boston Red Sox were in the World Series for the first time in twenty-one years. 1967 might be the year that the "Impossible Dream" came true. The Red Sox might bring home their first World Series title since 1918. They were, however, down 3-2 to a far more experienced St. Louis Cardinal team. Game Six, which was to be played on 11 October at Fenway Park, was pivotal: Boston had to win

to keep the dream alive.

Kane knew that he would be out on Operation Medina when the Red Sox played and that he wouldn't know the results until he returned. That didn't stop him from seeking out his good friend, fellow radioman Mike LaVallee. "We hit it off right away," says Kane, "basically because we were both radiomen." From the time the two men met, they would bet on just about any sporting event. "Each bet was for $2.00. Back then, that was a lot of money. For the World Series, he took the Cardinals. I naturally took the Red Sox." The two men placed their bet on Game Six. The winner, however, would have to wait a while to collect.

On the morning of 11 October, elements of First Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti, and Second Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Archie Van Winkle, prepared to be transported by helicopter into clearings deep in the Hai Lang Forest. Led by Charlie Company, 1/1 would sweep in a northeasterly direction toward 1/3's position.

For Lieutenant Ruffer, 11 October began early. He awoke and took the last hot shower he would have for a while. After a final briefing, he and his men went to the Ammunition Supply Point to pick up their ammunition. It was here that he encountered the mission's first piece of bad luck: There were no hand grenades left. He managed to scrounge only a few for the entire platoon.

Sniper R.J. Jackson had just returned from a week in the field. Exhausted, he dropped onto his canvas cot and watched as Dave Butt and Rod Lewis packed their gear and departed. They had been assigned to Charlie Company for Operation Medina. Relieved that he didn't have to go, Jackson rolled over on his cot for a well-deserved rest.

Battalion chaplain Father Ben Lyons, a Navy Lieutenant, conducted Mass in an open field. Combat photographer Bill Perkins filmed the service with his 16mm movie camera. Many of the men attended, even those who weren't Catholic. "We all knew we were going to a bad place," explains George Dougherty. "I guess the old adage 'There are no atheists in foxholes' is true." It wasn't unusual for Protestants to go to Catholic services or visa versa. "I guess when you're afraid, you look for God anywhere you can find Him, and we were all scared," Dougherty says.

After Mass, the men left for the nearby departure point to wait for

the helicopters that would transport them to Landing Zone Dove, deep in the Hai Lang Forest. As Mark Anderson was being trucked to the departure location, he noticed a lot of military traffic going up and down the highway. Suddenly, a military pick-up truck hit a mine. The front of the truck blew about 150 feet straight into the air. The hood came spinning down to the ground, and the men on the ground scattered.

Phil Seymour also saw the truck explode. *Jesus Christ,* he thought. *I've never seen a truck go like that before.*

This is a bad omen, Steve Kane thought as he watched the front end of the truck fly into the air.

Because he had a radio, Anderson was ordered to the scene. Two Army men had been sitting in the cab of the truck. Both were dead. He called in the first medevac of his tour.

The Marines were supposed to be picked up around 7 a.m. Instead, they sat in the sun for hours. Rumors circulated that the operation had been cancelled. While the men waited, the media arrived. Marine photographer Perkins, *Leatherneck* Magazine correspondent SSgt Bruce Martin and correspondent SSgt Phil Hartranft were part of the group. Newsmen from CBS, NBC, and ABC were also there.

The Marines were eager subjects. "You put a movie camera in front of a Marine, and he's going to show off," Ed Yates says. "Some would give peace signs, some would give the finger, and some would say 'Hi Mom.'" Pictures of Marine helmets, which were often personalized by the men, were especially popular with the press.

Hartranft was paired with Perkins: Hartranft would provide print coverage for Operation Medina, and Perkins would film it. Initially, they would accompany Ruffer's First Platoon for the operation, but they were given the freedom to move about the company. They shook hands on the LZ, meeting for the first time. Hartranft was 27 and Perkins was a young-looking 20. But Perkins had more experience. He had been in Vietnam longer and had made corporal in a year.

Perkins' first thoughts were about home. While they waited for the helicopters, he peppered Hartranft with questions about everything from sports to the anti-war demonstrations that he had heard about.

As the two men talked, Hartranft was struck by one fact: "Never once did I hear him say the word 'I.' He was always worried about someone else. That impressed me. A lot of guys tend to add things when they're telling a story, especially if they are talking about

themselves. Perkins wasn't like that. When he talked about who he went out in the field with or about other operations that he had gone on, it was always 'we.' It was always a team effort. You could tell that he had a good upbringing."

Perkins, who had been in Vietnam for several months, started telling Hartranft things he should look out for. Hartranft began to realize that Vietnam wasn't a "walk in the park." He was glad he had a partner on this adventure.

But sniper Rod Lewis, who was attached to Third Platoon, lost his partner before the operation began. As they waited to board a helicopter, Dave Butt started to get sick. He had dysentery, a common ailment for Marines in Vietnam. He had to be replaced. "We'd be on an operation for two weeks to a month and by the time it was over, we were all sick," Lewis says. "We would be on patrol and when we stopped, everybody would disappear off the trail." Kaopectate was usually used to treat the condition, but there were times when Lewis had to resort to his own remedy: "I started burning twigs and branches and mixing the charcoal up with peanut butter. That would plug me up pretty good."

Back at the company base, Jackson looked up from his cot to see his sergeant hovering overhead.

"Butt got sick, and Lewis needs a partner," the sergeant said.

"I just got back in," Jackson said. "I haven't slept in a couple of days." The sergeant was adamant. Jackson had to follow orders. He crawled out of his cot and packed his gear for the operation.

Lewis was pleased to see his new partner. R.J. Jackson was a tall, blond kid from Eagle Rock, California. The two had spent some time together between training sessions, and Jackson had even been to Lewis' house back in the states.

John Lee was also going on Medina with a familiar face: fellow Oregonian Brad Foote. Lee was suffering from jungle rot, a foot fungus common to Vietnam Marines. He was told that he could sit the operation out, but he decided to go and back up his buddy. "If you're going, I'm going," he told Foote. Both men were about two weeks away from ending their second tours in Vietnam.

By 1:30 p.m., the choppers had arrived. Each helicopter carried between six and nine men. Because Medina was such a large operation, Army helicopters were called in to assist the Marine UH-34 choppers. It wasn't long before chopper after chopper lifted into

the sky.

Ruffer and First Platoon were in the first lift en route to LZ Dove. It was a bright, sunny, humid day. The flight took about 25 minutes. The platoon's first job was to secure the landing zone while the rest of the company came in.

Sitting in one of the helicopters, Bill Guntor wondered what trouble the men were about to get into. Guntor was a radio operator with the Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) assigned to Charlie Company for this mission. He wasn't a regular part of Charlie Company, but as a field radio operator, he was used to being bounced around. "You went wherever you were needed," he says. "You were like the bastard child. Nobody wanted to be near you 'cause you had the radio that drew attention."

He knew Operation Medina would be trouble just because he was assigned to it. When the Marines were down at the Horseshoe, he had developed a reputation. Guntor was usually assigned to every third patrol that went out. On almost every operation he went out on, his patrol would take fire and have to call in mortars. The forward observers considered him bad luck and would fight to avoid having to take him out on patrol.

Through the open door of the helicopter, Dan Snell also saw ominous signs: the scars of war: "As we started flying toward the mountains, you could see where the B-52's had made their bombing runs. Where the ground had been wet, the bomb craters were full of water. It looked like a chain of lakes." Snell's helicopter landed on the uphill side of LZ Dove. He exited the chopper as fast as he could. Helicopters unloading men were prime targets for enemy snipers. Snell got out on the downhill side of the chopper and took about a 12-foot drop with all of his equipment.

He wasn't the only one on alert. "I remember the anticipation as we were flying into the landing zone," Major recalls. "You never knew if the enemy was waiting for you or if there were mines or booby traps in the LZ."

LZ Dove was a large flat plateau covered with elephant grass. The grass had broad leaves and could reach a height of six feet. The landing zone was at the base of a mountain that could be seen from Site X. As they landed, the Marines set up a perimeter to provide security for the other units coming in. It was not an easy process. Weighed down with weapons and equipment, forced to jump from

the chopper and then navigate a steep hill, and buffeted by the winds from the chopper blades, the men stumbled to keep their balance. “If the enemy was watching, we must have looked like teddy bears falling down a hill,” George Hutchings remembers.

Antal, Boxill, and Cole were on the same chopper. After landing, their squad proceeded forward in a column. A squad of mortar men followed. Snipers Rod Lewis and R.J. Jackson were also with Third Platoon, at least for the time being.

“Ruffner’s Raiders” were to stay a step ahead of the others. After the other platoons arrived, First Platoon turned over their LZ perimeter positions to others, reassembled, took the point, and moved toward the first of the battalion objectives. The battalion objectives were high pieces of terrain that were to be secured en route to Regimental Objective 5, the first regimental objective in their zone of action. When the first battalion objective was met, Major would place Third Platoon on point and First Platoon would rotate to the rear.

The men had their sleeves rolled up in the sweltering heat. Their arms were sliced by the barbs of the elephant grass as they moved toward the base of the mountain. When they reached the edge of the jungle, the point squad started cutting its way through with machetes.

Eventually, the entire company was on the ground. Ruffer’s men were on point, where they would remain for the next 24 grueling hours. They were followed by the company command group, Nelson’s Third Platoon, and then Anderson’s Second Platoon. The command group consisted of Captain Major, Gunny Thompson, Major’s radio operators, the Tactical Air Control Party (TACP), and a helicopter support team (HST). The HST was a small team trained to conduct helicopter re-supply and medevac missions.

Mike Robinson, Nelson’s radioman, would stay next to his lieutenant at all times. Communication with Major and the other platoons was vital. In addition to the heavy radio, Robinson carried an M16, ammunition, and an extra radio battery. Steve Kane, radio operator for Arty FO Scott Camil, was also weighed down with 25 pounds of radio equipment along with another 40 pounds of ammunition and other supplies.

Despite the rough terrain, all the Marines would have to carry weapons and supplies to sustain them through the operation. Phil

Seymour's mortar section carried twice as much weaponry as the riflemen did. Along with their M16s and ammunition, they carried six or eight 60mm rounds, and some men carried part of the weapon – the bi-pod, base plate, or tube.

Snipers Rod Lewis and R.J. Jackson would accompany the point squad of the lead platoon as they advanced into the jungle. "They decided that that was where we were best deployed," Lewis says. "If they saw something, they'd call 'snipers up' and we'd come running."

Lewis carried his sniper rifle, a .45 caliber handgun, and a fighting knife. He also carried two canteens, an ammo belt, and a large pouch attached to the belt where he kept about 40 rounds of sniper ammunition. He wore a helmet, a green T-shirt, green jungle utilities, and jungle boots. A pack containing his poncho, poncho liner, and C-Rations rounded out his equipment.

The Marines carried as many M16 magazines as they could. In a firefight, the magazines could be emptied in seconds. The average rifleman carried about eight magazines in the pouches on his equipment belt and had one in his weapon. The men also carried knapsacks with food and ammunition. Some carried grenades and bayonets. Many carried KA-Bars, a special fighting knife issued to Marines beginning in World War II. Others had top-of-the-line Randall-made knives or other modern equivalents to the KA-Bar. All personal items were left behind.

Mark Anderson, an FO for H&S Company's 81mm mortar platoon, was issued a radio called a PRC-41 or "Prick 41". Anderson had never seen this type of radio before. The PRC-41 was used by the TACP to direct the air support provided by fixed-wing or rotary-wing aircraft. For Medina, Anderson was no longer an FO. He was a member of the TACP. The radio he carried was a back-up for the other PRC-41 in the TACP. On an operation like this, there was always the possibility that a spare radio, and spare radio operator, might be needed.

The PRC-41 was an older model and was three times heavier than the radio he was used to carrying. In addition to the radio, Anderson, who is 6'3", was singled out to carry extra gear because of his size. Other Marines started throwing ropes and other supplies on his back. He also carried a machete, food in his spare socks, an extra battery for the radio and an M16. Once he was loaded down, he could barely move.

He considered the rifle unnecessary weight. "If the shit hit the fan, I

didn't fire my rifle," he says. "I got on the radio. It wasn't my job to fire my weapon. I had a lot more power through that radio than with that pea-shooter."

PFC Scott Thorne was also a radio operator with the TACP. As a radioman, he knew that he was a target for the enemy. But the heavy radio that he carried had an ultra-high frequency for communication directly with pilots. Should the Marines need air support, Thorne's radio would be a vital piece of equipment. He didn't carry a rifle. When the time came that the enemy was close enough to engage him, Thorne figured that there would be plenty of rifles available.

Doc Hammergren carried his Unit One, a .45 caliber pistol, his pack, two canteens and a large supply of bandages. The Navy corpsman carried bandoliers of battle dressings like Marines carried bandoliers of bullets. He also made sure that all the men had the battle dressing they were supposed to carry in their first aid pouches.

IV fluids were usually given to the corpsmen in cans. But there was some problem with the supply of IV cans for Medina, so Hammergren and the others were given glass bottles of IV fluid to carry. Carrying glass bottles over rough terrain was not a good sign.

George Boze, an 81mm mortar man, was attached to Ruffer's First Platoon for the operation. The 81's, however, could not be taken into the Hai Lang Forest. The equipment was too heavy for the long trek. On Medina, the mortar men would take the more portable 60mm mortars instead. Boze, a lance corporal with nine months in grade, was appointed gunner of the 60mm mortar attached to First Platoon.

Combat correspondent Hartranft wasn't fully prepared for his walk in the park. He took with him his notebook, helmet, flak jacket, two canteens of water, first aid packet, bayonet, sleeping bag, poncho, and personal gear in a map case. He armed himself with only a .45 caliber pistol and some ammunition. He wasn't carrying a rifle because he didn't think he would need it. He would soon find out how wrong that assumption was.

With a few exceptions, such as Combat Correspondent Hartranft, no 1/1 Marines wore flak jackets on Medina because of the heat and the strenuous nature of the operation. A Marine weighed down by a flak jacket as well as the other equipment he was required to carry could easily collapse. The danger of heat prostration had to be weighed against the danger posed by enemy contact.

As the men made their way forward, they descended the steep

grassy side of the plateau for about several hundred meters before proceeding uphill into the dense jungle. *It looks evil,* George Dougherty thought as he stepped from open daylight into the dim triple-canopy jungle.

From the beginning, the going was tough. After following Ruffer's First Platoon through the rolling hills of elephant grass, the Marines were soon in the midst of the heavy, lush vegetation. Triple-canopy jungle consists of different thick layers. The tallest and oldest trees stood about 100 feet tall. They towered overhead as guardians of the forest, allowing little light or wind to penetrate to the forest floor. The Marines couldn't see the sky, and the dim lighting was a sharp contrast to the bright daylight of LZ Dove.

Saplings, stalks, elephant grass, vines, and other plants crowded under the tall trees in thick masses, giving the Marines a limited field of vision in all directions. If a Marine had his rifle slung diagonally across his back, the weapon would get caught in branches as he moved forward. The ground was rocky and uneven. The Marines often struggled to keep their footing. The terrain rose up and down hills.

One advantage to the dense vegetation was that it blocked the intense rays of the blazing sun. The heavy foliage, however, held in the humidity like a sealed plastic container.

In the meantime, more troops were arriving for the operation. Delta Company followed Charlie into LZ Dove. The 25 minute flight seemed like a lifetime to Glenn Griffin. "As we flew in, I wondered what we were going to run into," he says. He had a bad feeling when he saw the forest. "You knew right away that it would be difficult to obtain air support from helicopters, jets, or anything," Griffin says.

Ruffer's men led the way on the hot, rough trek, but they couldn't take the easy way. "Any trail I found, I avoided," Ruffer says." I didn't want to be on the enemy's ground." So First Platoon cut its own path through the jungle, walking parallel to any trails. The point men, who were doing the toughest machete work, had to be replaced at regular intervals. The column moved slowly, tediously, barely five feet per minute. The men had been taught to keep appropriate spacing, but it was difficult at such a slow pace; the men often stumbled onto the heels of the person in front of them.

David Welsh remembers seeing a huge snake on the edge of the Marine's path. Someone had taken a machete and cut its head off.

Cole was reminded of Daniel Boone as the Marines blazed their trail through the forest. So many vines and plants blocked his path that he thought the people ahead of him weren't doing a good job. The person in front of him would chop something down, and then a vine would hang down and catch his rifle. He would have to turn sideways to get through and chop it. But he realized he was also leaving a rough trail for the men behind him, who would have to chop at more dangling vegetation to get through. Cole was drenched with sweat as he walked, chopped, and climbed his way forward.

As he cut through the forest, Lewis realized that his skills wouldn't be needed on this journey. "Snipers were useless. You couldn't see 30 feet the jungle was so thick." In only a few places were the Marines able to get a glimpse of blue sky.

After several hours, the men reached an area that had seen combat. The landscape was peppered with craters from artillery and bombs. Some of the bombs had exploded in the trees, breaking them like match sticks or hurling them for hundreds of yards. "You could see the path the shrapnel made as it sliced through the jungle," Snell says. "It made me realize that I never, ever wanted to be near one of those things when it hit."

The column moved up and down hills. Carrying his movie camera, Perkins climbed to different elevations to capture the men on their arduous hike. The dark jungle conditions made it difficult to capture much of the march on film, so he had to be content with capturing bits of action when the men were in open areas.

The River Crossing

After several hours of trail blazing, Ruffer's platoon came across a fast moving stream that was about 30 feet across, with water knee to neck deep. Ruffer selected a fireteam to make the initial crossing. Since he didn't know the depth of the water or the strength of the current, he asked for the best swimmer. One of Ruffer's men had been on the swim team in high school, so that man got the job of crossing the stream with a rope. Once the swimmer was safely across and secured the rope, the rest of the fireteam made their way across and set up a hasty perimeter on the opposite bank. Ruffer and the rest of the platoon followed. Each man held onto the rope with one hand and, with the other hand, carried his equipment high enough to stay dry. They had to move slowly; the force of the water and the slippery rocks beneath their feet forced them to be cautious.

After First Platoon made it across, Nelson's Third Platoon followed. Radioman Robinson fought the fast current with his radio on top of his head. He thought, *Holy cripes, if I lose it, man, this radio's going before me because I ain't going to die.* Both Robinson and the radio made it across.

Antal rolled his trouser legs up to his knees to cross, and when he reached the other side, he found he had some uninvited guests on his exposed legs: leeches. He fell to the ground, kicking and scratching. He had never encountered the creatures before. The other Marines laughed at him. One man lit a cigarette and burned the leeches off. Most of the Marines dropped their trousers after they crossed to look for leeches. Many men burned them off; some used the military-issued "bug juice" instead.

"That stuff was so toxic that it would probably eat through armor," Lewis says. "We'd keep the bug juice in little plastic bottles tied to our helmet. It would really burn if you got it on your eyes or lips." Many of the Marines also filled up their canteens from the stream water once they crossed.

The men continued to cross the river hand over hand on the single rope. "I thought I was going to get swept away never to be seen again, and I am tall," Mark Anderson says. "The short guys had to go under. The river was really flowing."

Joe Zorn is 5'8". He carried a steel helmet, 4 nine-pound rounds for his 3.5-inch rocket launcher, 2 or 3 grenades, a KA-Bar fighting knife, a .45 pistol and two canteens. He also carried a 3.5-inch rocket launcher, which weighed about thirteen pounds. The launcher was carried in two halves by a sling across his back. "I had to hold onto the sling with my right hand and the rope with my left hand as I was crossing that river with its swift current." he says. "The water hit me in the chest and got close to my chin. I thought that the current might pull me away from the rope or I that I would go under. Then I would be dead meat. All that weight would pull me under."

When Hartranft reached the steep ravine and looked down, he thought, *Oh man, I can't do this.* He did, however, make it across. Relieved, he looked for Perkins. The intrepid photographer had already made the crossing, moved to the front of the platoon, and was filming the Marines as they traversed the river.

Delta Company followed the path that Charlie had blazed. When he crossed, Griffin's main concern was to keep the handset of the radio

dry. The radio had some protection from the water. It was encased in steel and the extra batteries were attached in plastic bags. He had to hold the handset, however, above his head, with his other hand gripped firmly to the rope.

Charlie Company didn't venture far past the river before setting up a perimeter defense for the night. The Company did not meet its objective for the first day. That would have to wait for 12 October. Due to the slow progress of the men on point, Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti and his battalion command group spent the first night on LZ Dove.

That night, Ruffer's men set up a night defense in a valley between two large hills. They were in a riverbed with water, in some places, about knee deep. Even though low ground was often a disadvantage, the area was filled with huge boulders that offered some protection should the platoon be attacked.

The men were aware of the hardships and dangers that awaited them the next day. Antal couldn't sleep. As he stared above at the blackened jungle, he overheard a conversation between two veterans. The salts said that the operation was nothing to worry about. There hadn't been any firefights in the area in the past month or two. *That didn't sound so bad,* he thought. Antal hoped that the men would walk up and down mountains for a couple of days and then head out of the forest.

Antal was also worried about the decision to bed down in the riverbed. Taking the low ground was contrary to what he had been taught. He wondered whether the right decisions were being made. Lieutenant Ruffer came around to the big boulder where Antal was resting, checking on the men's positions. "When I saw that he was an older man, I felt more assured," Antal says. "It made me feel a lot better that someone older knew what he was doing." Ruffer had just turned 26 the week before.

Dougherty also couldn't sleep. He had a premonition that Charlie Company would be ambushed. He kept thinking, *I know we're gonna get hit. I know it's gonna be bad.* He kept counting up the bad omens: He was a short timer with only a month left. His daughter had been born, but he had never seen her. And now Charlie Company was camped in the NVA's back yard. To him, that added up to one thing: He was going to get killed.

The Marines were dealing with an entirely new environment. In the

south, they were accustomed to rice paddies, sand dunes, and mud flats. They were now in a wet, humid, steep, forbidding mountainous jungle. As the men tried to sleep, it began to rain. Leeches swam through the water on the jungle floor and attached themselves to the men.

Mark Anderson hunched against the base of a tree and put his poncho over his head. Rain, fear, discomfort, fatigue, and anticipation weren't the only factors he and the other men had to deal with. Hungry mosquitoes swarmed around them. Anderson decided to test the bug juice. He soaked one arm in the insect repellant and left the other arm untouched. The next morning, welts covered the untouched arm, but the coated arm was bite free. For the rest of his tour, he used the bug juice profusely.

Jungle rot was also a constant threat. In the humid rain forest environment, simple cuts or scratches could become infected and turn into painful sores. "Jungle rot was like athlete's foot of the whole body," Snell says. That night, he tried out a new medication to ward off the condition: a thick substance, much like Vaseline, in a large tube. He applied it to his feet and pulled his socks over it.

Hartranft dug a fighting hole. He sat huddled under his poncho in the shallow burrow, water up to his ankles, thinking *What am I doing here?*

Ruffer was up most of the night making sure that at least half of his men were awake, alert, and on watch. His platoon sergeant, Bill Cooley, complained to him: "Lieutenant, I wish you would get more sleep. You're going to get us killed if you aren't thinking straight."

The men were wet, cold, tired, and spooked. Even though they were miserable, the night was uneventful. There was no enemy contact.

Karl Bockman, the 18-year-old lance corporal with Delta Company, kept a combat diary throughout Operation Medina. On the morning of 12 October, he summed up conditions on that first night in the jungle: "Last night it rained, but I was warm in my poncho and poncho liner. We are fearful of the mosquitoes in this area of having malaria. They don't bother me much but these leeches are trying to suck me dry."

UH-34 helicopter arrives as Marines prepare landing zone, Operation Medina, late afternoon, 12 October 1967.

9 The Trail

Before sunrise on 12 October, SSgt Cooley woke up his Lieutenant. Ruffer had been asleep for a little over an hour.The sergeant offered him breakfast: heated C-Ration white bread, ham slices, cheese, and scrambled eggs assembled into a small sandwich. “It was an Egg McMuffin before there was an Egg McMuffin,” Ruffer says.

The men of Charlie Company began to stir. They burned off the leeches that had attached themselves during the night, ate a quick breakfast of C-Rations, and moved out. But progress was slow from the beginning. The farther into the jungle the men went, the denser the foliage got. “Where there used to be two trees, now there were three,” Phil Hartranft says. “The trees were covered in low hanging plants. If you could picture the worst jungle scenario, that’s what it looked like to me.”

The trek was made more hazardous by the slick rocks and vegetation that covered the steep hills. Two men fell on the slippery ground and had to be evacuated, further slowing the advance of the company.

Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti had wanted Company C to make the first battalion objective on the first day. On the second day, his impatience was showing. As the men hacked their way through the jungle, he demanded constant updates from Captain Major on the progress of the column.

“Are you on Objective One yet?” he asked.

“No, we’re a thousand meters away,” Major responded.

“Well, what’s the hold up?” Belbusti asked.

The need to reach the first and second objectives was one of security. “The objectives were defensible pieces of terrain,” Belbusti says. “Certain terrain is defensible and certain terrain is not. A nice, high piece of ground with clear fields of fire is defensible. If you are on low ground and you can’t see a damn thing, you are in deep trouble. If the enemy attacked you from higher ground, you were at a severe disadvantage.” The goal was to reach each objective, get the defensive perimeter set in and clear fields of fire before dark. If that didn’t happen, there could be hell to pay for Charlie Company.

The first objective was finally reached at about 1 p.m. on 12 October. It was a high piece of ground that had been struck by a 500-pound bomb, leaving a giant crater in the forest. The crater was

about 20 feet deep and 30 feet across.

When Major and his men arrived at the spot, he ordered the column to stop. The men around him sat in the sunny, dry crater and ate C- Rations for lunch. Even though the break offered a nice respite from the arduous march, it also held an ominous warning. The crater was new. So was the fresh, well-worn footpath that detoured around its edge. As Dan Snell walked along the footpath, he noticed a piece of cloth fluttering high in the trees, possibly a fragment of clothing. "The only way it could have gotten there was if someone had been blown away by that bomb," he says. "I didn't like walking down that trail. It was very, very spooky. There was no doubt in my mind that the enemy had used this trail very recently. That trail meant trouble."

Clumps of NVA foxholes were located at regular intervals down the footpath. During bombing runs, the enemy took shelter in the foxholes. "The whole area screamed 'Watch Out,'" Snell says.

The crater was on top of a small ridge. A saddle, or small valley, was located between the ridge and the next piece of high ground. In the saddle was a "finger," an elevated piece of terrain coming off a ridgeline. That finger was Regimental Objective 5, approximately 1,400 yards away.

After a short lunch, the men set out again. As planned, Major ordered Ruffer's platoon to drop back to the rear of the column to rest. Third Platoon was now on point, followed by Second Platoon and then First. Third Platoon hacked its way down the hill.

Third Platoon had about 36 men instead of the full compliment of45. The point squad consisted of five men: the point man, cover man, squad leader, Lieutenant Nelson and his radioman, Mike Robinson. As the leader of his platoon, Nelson knew that he had to stay up front and lead by example. He also needed to be in a position to see what was going on. The machine guns and rocket squad were not far behind. A machine gunner was not placed on point because he could not respond to an ambush as quickly as a rifleman.

The men set out again on their hot, slow march. Mark Anderson was still carrying all the extra equipment that had been piled on his back at the LZ. He started to climb yet another hill, struggling with the weight. Half way up, he heard somebody say, "The radio operator's passing out." Anderson thought, *Jeez, I'm the radio operator.* He didn't realize he was slowly dropping to the ground.

"Roll him under a bush," another Marine said. Anderson was rolled

under some foliage, but he still didn't realize what was going on. All he knew was that his senses had slowly started to fade. He lay under the bush for a while, breathing heavily, trying to restore his body to normal. He finally was able to get up and push forward.

After lunch, Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti continued to push Captain Major. When Major explained why the progress was so slow, Belbusti said, "If it's going to take this long by not using the trails, then get on a trail."

"I don't want to get on any trails," Major said. "That's where the enemy could ambush us." That answered satisfied Belbusti for several hours.

Colonel Belbusti had a very high opinion of the commander of Charlie Company. "He was intelligent, well trained and knew what he was doing," Belbusti says. "He didn't make mistakes. He was forceful and had command presence. He had command of the situation." For the time being, Belbusti let Captain Major do his job.

Adding to Belbusti's perception of the battalion's slow progress was the fact that the men were strung out. The 200 or so men of Charlie were walking 10 to 15 meters between each man. Delta Company followed with a similar long string of 200 men in single file. So even though the point squad had reached the first objective, the battalion commander had barely moved.

Even with a fresh platoon on point, progress continued to be painfully slow. Nelson was forced to rotate the lead men because the work was too exhausting for just one Marine. "One guy was literally in tears about chopping through that stuff," Nelson says. "He had chopped through about 75 or 100 meters, and he was just done in. I didn't blame him at all." At times, Kevin "K.C." Cahill and Doff Edwards would take point. At other times, Ed Krisko and Joe Gamble would do the job. As the afternoon wore on, Cahill, an experienced rifleman, volunteered to take the position again.

Mike Cole watched as the point men traded off. *I'm glad I don't have that job,* he thought. As a rocket man, he was in the middle of the pack. Even though he didn't want the job, Cole had great admiration for any Marine who would take it: "To me, the point man was the most experienced guy," he says. "He was the tip of the spear. He was going to take care of the rest of us. He was the scout that went out in front of the cavalry."

Nelson knew the point man was a risky position. "The point is the

worst place to be. When you are cutting through the jungle like that, you don't do it quietly."

Since Robinson was near the front, he was able to appreciate the men's unique position. "I never thought I'd be in the lead squad of the lead platoon for the whole freakin' battalion," he says.

The situation grew tense as hours passed. It was now late afternoon. Before long, the sun would set. Belbusti called Major on the radio, insistent. "The map is showing a trail," he said. "You need to get on that trail. We need to reach the next objective before dark."

There were no good options. If the Marines took the trail, they might be ambushed. If they didn't take the trail and failed to reach the second objective, their night time defense would be vulnerable. They could end up on low ground, easy prey for an enemy deployed above them.

Major's headquarters group was behind Third Platoon. The headquarters group consisted of the Captain, a forward air controller with his three radiomen, an artillery forward observer, battalion TAC radio operator, company TAC radio operator, an HST with their radio, and Gunny Thompson. Battalion TAC refers to the Tactical Net, the radio frequency over which tactical communications between the battalion headquarters and its five companies are transmitted and received. Radio operators transmitted messages drafted by their officer, wrote down the text of incoming messages for their officer, and monitored the net continually for relevant messages.

At about 4 p.m., Lieutenant Nelson radioed back that they had found the trail that was on the map. Captain Major's headquarters group had barely moved off of the crater where they had stopped for lunch. Major called a halt to the column. He radioed Belbusti and told him where they were. According to the map, the trail would lead them to Regimental Objective 5, which was on a large hill mass.

It was no small jungle trail: it was wide and well used. The ground was packed so tightly from wear it seemed as hard as a paved road. Ed Krisko, whose position up front gave him a clear view of the solid trail, heard men all around him mumbling, "This is no good." But the trail looked good. It was hard-packed for smooth walking, and it was wide enough that the men wouldn't be hindered by the brush growing along the sides. Two men could probably walk side- by-side if they wanted.

I hope they take it, Dennis Antal thought. *It would be nice to walk on a path for a while.*

Cole had similar thoughts: *Why don't we start on this path? Boy, we're going to have some easy going now.*

Beats cutting through the brush, Steve Kane thought when he heard the plan.

Nelson had mixed feelings about taking the trail. "You didn't have any good options," he says. "You could go crashing through the jungle and make a lot of noise or you could get on a trail, which was an obvious ambush location. The trail would make travel easier and maybe more silent. It got to the point – I don't care what anybody says – that you had to use those damn trails if you were going to get anywhere."

Finally, Belbusti gave Major a direct order: "Get on the trail. Do it. I don't want to hear any more about getting ambushed."

"I really don't want to do that," Major said.

"Just do it," Belbusti said. "We have to be on that next objective before dark. The only way we are going to do it is to get on that trail."

"I didn't want to be caught half way through the jungle when darkness fell," Belbusti recalls. "That would have been a disaster. Picture a battalion strung out in a path through the jungle that has been cut by machetes. Where would the troops go? How would they set up? There would be no way to establish a perimeter. The jungle was too thick and the ground was sloping upward. It was the worst possible situation you could have."

Another factor that entered into the Battalion Commander's decision was the fact that, up to that point, there had been no contact with the enemy. "The probability of an ambush was low because we hadn't seen or heard any enemy up to that point." Belbusti says. "We weren't probed and we didn't see any patrols. That weighed into the equation. I decided to take the gamble and take the faster route to the higher piece of terrain."

Gunny Thompson whispered, "Don't do it! Don't do it!" But Captain Major did as he was ordered. He told Nelson to proceed onto the trail. "Be cautious," he said. "We're getting close to the enemy."

Major called Lieutenant Ruffer and told him of the decision. Third Platoon would continue on point, Second Platoon would follow, and First Platoon would be the rear guard.

"Skipper, we're asking for it if we get on the trail," Ruffer said.

“We’re following orders, Lieutenant,” Major replied.

Ruffer didn’t like the idea of being on a trail and he didn’t like the idea of taking an objective at night while negotiating the jungle terrain. He was hoping the company would spend the night in a defensive position and take the objective the following morning.

For George Dougherty, taking the trail was the final bad omen. “I knew our fate was sealed,” he says. “I knew there was a reason that trail was well-defined. It was being used and it wasn’t being used by Marines or ARVN. It had to be NVA, and I knew it.”

Cahill stepped onto the trail at a 90-degree angle and followed it to the right. The rest of Third Platoon followed. Nelson sought to keep an interval of about 10 yards between men. If the men were spread out, any enemy fire would cause less damage.

The Marines moved as silently as possible. Cahill was followed by Edwards, one of his best friends in Vietnam, Nelson and radioman Robinson. The rest of the platoon along with snipers R.J. Jackson and Rod Lewis followed. Nelson continued to talk to Major on the radio as the squad went forward. Cahill, an aggressive point man, extended the interval between himself and Doff Edwards.

It wasn’t long before it became clear that something wasn’t right. Cahill had a bad feeling about what lay ahead. He passed his concern back to Robinson. “Let’s not do this,” he said. “I got bad feelings, man.”

Robinson was concerned. He knew Cahill was a sharp point man with a keen intuition for danger. Although all the men felt unsettled being on the trail, Cahill’s feelings were especially strong.

But Cahill had to follow orders, so he continued down the path. It made a sharp turn to the left up toward a small knoll. Dense vegetation on both sides concealed the path after the turn. Cahill cautiously followed the trail to the left.

All was quiet as the men moved forward.

Suddenly, the stillness was shattered by the deafening staccato crack of a machine gun. Small arms fire tore through the column of men. Grenades fell from the sky like rain, sending shards of hot shrapnel through the Marines as they detonated.

The predictable, yet lethal, ambush had been sprung. The North Vietnamese had been waiting for the Marines on the well-concealed hill.

Cahill dropped with the first blast of machine gun fire. A grenade

hit Edwards, and two grenades exploded near Nelson and Krisko. Scalding shrapnel pierced Nelson in the upper left leg and stomach. Fragments of metal struck Krisko in the head. He dropped to the ground, dizzy, disoriented, with blood pouring from the wound.

"It was like the Fourth of July," Robinson says. "There were grenades coming out of the trees, machine guns were opening up on us, just everything."

Because the column was spread out, many of the Marines had yet to make it to the trail. Lewis had just stepped onto the path, marveling at how well worn and wide it was as it traversed across the face of the hill. Although he was apprehensive, he was relieved that he didn't have to fight through the jungle anymore. Then, the NVA machine gun cracked the silence. Lewis and Jackson hit the deck. Enemy bullets raked the foliage above them. Shattered tree limbs and branches cascaded down on the two men as they tried to take cover. The enemy had set up their ambush with a machine gun right in the corner of the trail and at several other positions across the path, right above it. Over the din of weapons fire, the men could hear the blood curdling screams of the North Vietnamese.

The two snipers tried to imbed themselves in the dirt. The enemy machine gun fired incessantly, and the noise was so loud the two men felt as if they were right under the machine gun's position.

Lewis heard somebody yell, "I'm hit!" He could see all the men in front of him lying on the trail, but he couldn't tell who was wounded.

Near the front of the column, Nelson was still mobile despite his wounds. Cahill and Edwards, however, were both down. Cahill was lying on the path, facing away from his Lieutenant. Edwards was behind a fallen tree. Nelson screamed, "Machine gun up!" A gunner ran up the trail. An enemy grenade exploded near him, and the gunner fell.

Another grenade came in. It landed near Cahill. The explosion blew him into the air and turned him toward Nelson.

Paul Nelson could see the young man's face. He knew he had to act.

Edwards, who lay wounded behind a log to Nelson's left, pounded the ground with his fist. "I can't leave K.C. there!" he shouted to Nelson. But Edwards' wounds were too severe for him to help.

"I'm going to get him." Nelson yelled. The Lieutenant picked himself up off the path and ran past Edwards. As he got close to Cahill, he saw that one of the Marine's hands was badly mangled, but

that he was still alive. Nelson grabbed Cahill under the armpits and tried to sprint back to cover. Cahill was limp and didn't say a word as Nelson pulled him along.

Robinson, watching the rescue attempt, saw grenades fall out of the trees near Nelson.

"LIEUTENANT! GRENADES!" he yelled.

But Nelson had his back to the lethal explosives. He didn't see them. He couldn't hear Robinson's warning over the thunder of combat.

As the grenades fell behind Nelson and Cahill, they detonated. Scorching shards of metal bore into Nelson's buttocks and legs. The pain was immediate, intense and unbearable. The blast broke Nelson's grip on Cahill and blew the Lieutenant down the trail. Nelson pulled himself behind a log. Cahill lay where the grenade exploded.

Robinson covered his head as the grenades detonated. Then, he came up shooting, firing into the trees in an attempt to knock out the enemy grenadiers. One enemy soldier slumped over in a tree, and a second fell like a rock onto the jungle floor. The area was now a little safer. He got on his radio and yelled, "CORPSMEN UP!"

Nelson screamed for his radioman. Robinson crawled over to Nelson and saw that the Lieutenant was severely wounded.

Nelson's first thought was that his legs had been blown off. He summoned the courage to look back, fearing the worst. His legs were still there, bloody but intact. But he couldn't move them, and he was in excruciating pain.

Nelson radioed Major. "We've been hit," he said. "Bring up reinforcements!"

Antal, Boxill, and Cole were still in the jungle near the trail when the ambush was sprung. When they heard the NVA machine gun, the three took cover behind some trees and rocks along the path. When the enemy gunner paused to load ammo, the three men got on the trail and began to move up. Somebody yelled, "Get off the path!" The men ducked off the trail to the right and dropped to a prone position in a dry creek bed that ran up the hill.

Someone yelled for machine gun ammunition. Cole had one can in his hand and dug a second from his pack. He got up, ran across the creek bed, and turned onto the path. His squad leader grabbed him and pulled him down.

“They’re calling for machine gun ammo,” Cole said.

“It’s up there,” his squad leader said, motioning that the line of fire was high across the path and that Cole shouldn’t stand as he moved. “Take the ammo up to the front.”

A split second later, a bullet struck the squad leader’s helmet and ricocheted off the right side. The Marine looked dazed for a moment.

“Are you OK?” Cole asked.

“Get that up there!” his squad leader shouted back.

Cole got on the path and sprinted in the direction of the firing machine gun, the ammo rattling in the cans as he ran. Marines were in defensive positions on the ground all around him. He ran about forty feet up the trail, not far from where Nelson lay wounded.

“You – the ammo – get it up front!” Nelson ordered. Cole continued to hear the firing of the machine gun. He thought the gun belonged to a Marine.

Cole ran forward, up the path. He passed more Marines, some lying faced toward the top of the hill, and some faced in the opposite direction. Their feet were on the path but their bodies were off to the side. Were these men taking cover, or had they been killed in the ambush?

Antal also ran up the trail to provide cover for the wounded Marines. He knelt next to Cahill and fired his rifle into the jungle. He looked down at KC, a young, freckled-faced kid. Antal didn’t understand why the Marine was just lying there. He thought, *Get up and fight! Get up and fight.* Another Marine grabbed Antal by the shoulder and moved him back.

Past the ambush site, Cole looked around for the Marine machine gun team that needed the ammo. He quickly spotted the machine gun. Three men had picked the weapon up and were preparing to move it to a new location. The soldiers wore gray-green uniforms. A red star emblazoned the front of their pith helmets. Their machine gun was not a Marine M60. This gun had a plastic handle, a big box, a long tube, and a round cone on the front.

The machine gun team was NVA. They had taken out Cahill and who knows who else. Now, because of the quick arrival of Marine reinforcements, they were moving to a safer location.

Cole was a mere 15 feet from them. One man carried the machine gun, another carried the ammo belt, and the third man carried an AK47. The third man turned and looked directly at Cole.

Cole's reaction was reflexive. He had been trained well. He whipped around his M16 and opened up on the NVA. As he fired, he started running back down the trail sideways, continuing to let the rounds go as he ran. He unloaded a whole magazine, which was 20 rounds, into the three North Vietnamese. He didn't stick around long enough to see if they dropped, but he thought that he got all three. He never did find the Marine machine gun that he was looking for.

As Cole ran back down the path, bullets popped past his ear and hit the bushes around him. These rounds were being fired by Marines toward the enemy. Cole immediately dropped off the path and lay against the hill to let the Marines fire down the trail. When there was a pause, Cole sprinted toward Nelson and Robinson.

When he reached the open area near Nelson, he fell in place with Marines who were shooting up the path and up the hill. Cole yelled, "Denny!" To his right, Cole heard Antal yell, "Over here!" Boxill was next to Antal. The squad was back together.

The corpsmen had moved forward, and one arrived at Nelson's side. He gave the wounded Lieutenant a shot of morphine, but it had little effect. Nelson was still in excruciating pain. Knowing his commander was now in good hands, Robinson ran up the trail to check on the point squad. He dragged several of the wounded men off the path while the enemy continued to fire around him.

Doc Dowd, who had been assigned to Second Platoon for Operation Medina, arrived and saw his friend Cahill lying on the trail. He was still alive. KC clutched his stomach with one hand. As he ran toward Cahill, Dowd saw Lieutenant Nelson lying by a tree, being treated by a corpsman. Dowd was aware of the Marines around him returning fire at the enemy. He sensed that other Marines were taking hits, but he focused on getting to KC.

When he reached Cahill, Dowd knelt down, tore open Cahill's shirt, and saw three bullet holes in the pattern of machine gun fire across his abdomen. Cahill's intestine was protruding through one of the holes. Blood covered his green utilities. Cpl Bob Richmond of Nelson's Third Platoon came up next to him. Richmond stood over Dowd's shoulder and began firing, giving Dowd and Cahill some protective fire.

"The noise was outrageous," Dowd says. "When you are few inches in front of an M16 that is being fired, you are catching all of the sound and the flash."

Nelson's remaining squads arrived quickly to reinforce the point men. They fired at the enemy, pushing them back a little and securing the area. Since the enemy had control of the hill overlooking the ambush site, the Marines had to stand in order for their fire to be effective, but standing made them targets for the enemy. So taking the high ground was essential. After establishing a base of fire directed at high ground where the enemy had its best advantage, some of the Marines moved up and took the ridge from the NVA.

Although the Marines were taking some ground from the North Vietnamese, the presence of more men intensified the battle. The firefight was nonstop. The well-prepared NVA were everywhere – in the trees and on the ground. The enemy was camouflaged in the thick foliage, and the Marines often couldn't see where to fire.

Doc Hammergren, assigned to Second Platoon, had also surged forward at the call for corpsmen. At first, most of the Marines he found were either being helped by other corpsmen or were beyond help. Then he found one wounded Marine, then another. He began bandaging as fast as he could, quickly removing battle dressings from his bandoliers as he worked.

Robinson's radio had been hit by shrapnel, but it still worked. He could hear Major yelling through the handset, "What the hell's going on up there?" Nelson assessed the situation as best he could: Grenades were being thrown from trees. The enemy looked well fortified. They had known the Marines were coming.

"We have to get some men up to get us out of here," Nelson said.

Major and his command group were right above the ambush but couldn't see it because of the heavy jungle canopy. From a couple of hundred yards away, they heard the rifle and automatic weapon fire and the explosions of grenades.

Like all competent commanders in the midst of battle, Major assessed the situation and acted quickly. He ordered all machine guns, mortars, and rockets from Second and First Platoons up to reinforce the beleaguered Third. Then, he deployed the rest of Anderson's Second Platoon forward and around to the right of the knoll. Major hoped to outflank the enemy.

The mortar men from Phil Seymour's section were about 40 meters back from the point squad when the ambush hit. Major needed to put some heavy fire in front of Nelson's platoon. He ordered the 60mm mortars up to provide cover for the wounded. The squad

moved up under heavy enemy fire. Along with George Boze, who had been attached from H&S for the mission, the section included Roger Walton, Bill Ewing, Terry Gerba, Willie Greson, James McIlwain, and John Gibson.

Seymour and his men moved close to the ambush site. When he arrived, he saw Cahill lying on the trail, bleeding profusely from an abdominal wound. He saw two corpsmen applying battle dressings to his friend. The mortar section quickly set up one of their tubes near the straight portion of the trail. They began to fire rounds through the trees, being careful not to injure the point squad that was down.

Only one tube was fired because the canopy was too dense, and the men were concerned about using up their ammo too quickly.

Seymour's target was the small knoll overlooking the ambush site. The enemy controlled that location. Seymour hoped to either dislodge the North Vietnamese or prevent them from receiving reinforcements. The mortar men sent ten, fifteen, and then twenty rounds into the area just beyond the ambush site where it was assumed the enemy would be positioned, but there was little reduction in the rate of enemy fire.

When the NVA hit the point squad, Lieutenant Ruffer heard the deadly crack of small arms fire and the blast of grenades. Then, his radio lit up. He grabbed the handset from Mike LaVallee and heard men talking over each other. Then, Captain Major ordered Ruffer's First Platoon to form a defensive perimeter behind Third and Second. If the company was attacked from the rear, the Marines would be caught in a deadly crossfire.

Ruffer and his men moved forward and established a perimeter on the high ground to the right of the path the Marines had cut through the jungle. This ground sloped gently up about 100 yards above the deadly trail that led to the ambush. Ruffer placed his men so as to be able to defend a 360-degree perimeter. He had no idea from which direction an enemy attack might come. He ordered the men to clear some fields of fire so the Marines could see where they were shooting. Then, he waited.

Delta Company was farthest from the point of ambush. They had made the river crossing and were marching up the hill toward the giant bomb crater when Nelson's Third Platoon got hit. "We heard a tremendous amount of rifle and grenade fire. When that happened, we all hit the deck," Glenn Griffin says. "I got on my radio and tried

to find out what was going on." Charlie Company was getting hit hard.

Delta Company stood by on the thin jungle path that Charlie Company had cut earlier in the day, waiting for orders. They held their position for about an hour while Charlie Company took controlof its situation. Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti asked Major if he needed reinforcements from Delta, but Major said no.

Major faced the most common tactical problem in Vietnam. With the exception of Third Platoon, the Marines simply didn't know where the NVA were. "The constant battle was locating the enemy, getting a fix on him, and going in there and getting him to fight where you could punish him," Major says. "Normally, he ambushed you and by the time you recovered, he broke contact."

Back in the column with Second Platoon, Ed Yates couldn't see the ambush when it happened, but he heard the forest erupt in gunfire and heard the calls on the radio: "All Third Platoon up." "All corpsmen up." Then, "Everybody up."

Yates and his platoon moved forward. Usually, the appearance of more Marines would cause the sound of battle to taper off as the enemy retreated. Not this time. As more Marines got involved, more NVA got involved.

Radioman Mark Anderson, having barely recovered from his bout with heat exhaustion, was with Major's command group, trying to keep up with the column, when the ambush hit.

"I was just putting one foot in front of the other, trying not to fall over," he says. "The next thing I know, the whole world is going nuts. The shit hit the fan from every direction. Hand grenades were going off and there was a lot of small arms fire."

At the beginning of a firefight, a radio operator waits for direction from an officer. An infantryman drops down, load ups and, if needed, starts firing. Anderson stood waiting for his orders.

An officer or NCO charged over to Anderson, yanked the radio off his back, grabbed him by the collar, put him down at a specific place in the jungle, and said, "You're here." Anderson was no longer a radio operator. He became a rifleman on the spot.

When the enemy machine gun stopped, Lewis and Jackson heard a sergeant call for help, so they got up and ran forward. When they rounded the corner, they saw the downed Marines and Doc Dowd working on Cahill. A couple of other Marines also ran up to the point

near them.

Suddenly, Edwards yelled, “Duck! Grenade!” The standing Marines dived from the trail. Dowd leaned over KC’s head and shoulders to shield him when he felt a big thud on his back. It was Edwards. He dived on top of Dowd to protect him. The grenade exploded, sending shrapnel searing into Edwards’ legs and backside. “Oh, my ass!” he screamed.

A piece of shrapnel passed Edwards and hit Dowd in the shoulder. Dowd felt the pain but thought he had jammed his shoulder against a little gnarl of root sticking up from the ground. When he reached for his canteen to wet a battle dressing, he saw blood running down the front of his shirt. He pulled his shirt open. Blood was pouring from his shoulder.

Dowd grabbed two or three battle dressings and tossed them back to Edwards and told him to start opening the plastic. Corpsman T.C. Noble was helping Dowd treat Cahill. The two men did their best to get a battle dressing on Cahill’s wound, but he was bleeding out internally. One of the bullets had severed his descending vena cava.

After the explosion, Jackson and Lewis continued up the trail. Even though the NVA machine guns had been taken out, the men on the trail were still taking fire from an AK47 somewhere farther up the hill to the left. The men couldn’t see who was up there. There could have been one rifleman or an entire squad. It didn’t matter. A sergeant wanted to silence all fire coming from that direction. He looked at Lewis and Jackson and said, “We’re going to assault that hill!”

The three men charged the ridge. As they moved up, they took fire from their left. Lewis and Jackson dived behind a log. Six inches separated Jackson’s head and Lewis’ feet. Lewis looked back at Jackson. Suddenly, a bullet ripped through the log. It missed both men, having gone between Jackson’s head and Lewis’ feet. Lewis looked back over the log to see where the enemy was and saw a bullet tumbling slowly in his direction. The bullet had ricocheted off a tree. The now spent round flew harmlessly over their heads. Lewis and Jackson got up and continued up the hillside, constantly looking to their left to see who was shooting at them. When they got to the top of the knoll, the sergeant assessed the situation and ordered them to go back down to the trail. The NVA were gone.

Shortly after the ambush hit, Second Platoon assault men Joe Zorn

and Dan Snell heard the order: “Corpsmen up!”. Then they heard: “All corpsman up!” Finally, the word came: “Rockets up!” Zorn, Snell and Tony Baumgartner sprang to their feet and ran up the trail.

Zorn carried a 3.5-inch rocket launcher, which is similar to the bazooka used in WWII. As he ran, Zorn saw wounded Marines to his left and right. He ran past Lieutenant Nelson. Unexploded Chinese communist grenades littered the trail. “Where’d the gooks go?... where’d the gooks go?...” he shouted. “They’re over there... and there...” was the reply. Zorn couldn’t see the NVA so when he came to a clearing he stopped, loaded the rocket launcher and fired into the jungle. “The rounds have to go so many feet before they arm and detonate,” Zorn says. “I would shoot where I could see fields of fire. I shot white phosphorous and high explosive rounds.”

Zorn fired to his left, then his right, to his right again and back to his left. “Next thing you know, I felt a tap on my head. Somebody loaded me up. I looked behind and it was Snell. He followed me like a tattoo.”

As he ran, Snell focused on the back of Zorn’s head. Snell was Zorn’s A-gunner. His job was to load the rockets and carry ammunition. As he ran, the wounded men warned him about incoming grenades and those on the ground that had yet to explode. It was organized chaos, Snell thought.

Fear gripped Snell as he ran up to the battle. “The anticipation and the fear were the spookiest. Once you got up there and got involved in it, somehow participating in it was not quite as bad as waiting for or anticipating it. It was the brief period right before battle that was the scariest.”

Marines were on both sides of the trail. Some were talking; some were not moving. Snell saw Edwards lying on the ground. A corpsman was putting bandages on wounds on his backside. Edwards yelled, “Watch out for grenades! Watch out for grenades!”

The NVA were throwing three types of grenades: concussion, fragmentation and improvised or homemade. Concussion grenades created a loud sound and a forceful blast of air. They were designed to be thrown into enclosed places like bunkers or tunnels and kill the occupants with tremendous over-pressure. Fragmentation grenades shot deadly pieces of hot metal shrapnel upon detonation. Homemade grenades were improvised explosives, usually small blocks of TNT wrapped in banana leaves with a fuse and detonator.

After Snell arrived, there was ten minutes of chaos. The Marines fired some rockets, and he fired his M16 at anything that moved. Small arms fire and grenades continued to fall on the Americans. The NVA were in the trees, but the Marines couldn't tell where they were.

Working on a wounded man near Second Platoon's position, Doc Hammergren was shot in the right wrist. The wound was superficial, but for a moment he went into shock. Knowing that corpsmen were needed, Yates grabbed Hammergren and started slapping him, yelling, "Get up, Doc. Get up!" Hammergren got up and continued working on the Marine.

Finally, after about 20 minutes, the enemy broke off contact. The Marines slowed their rate of fire and then stopped firing altogether.

The corpsmen tried to get to as many men as they could. Some of the wounded men were screaming. Some were silent. Some asked for cigarettes, but most begged for water. When shock starts to set in after a wound, men are often thirsty.

The ambush had been brief but deadly. Despite the best efforts of Corpsmen Dowd and Noble, 19-year old Kevin Cahill died shortly after losing consciousness. The remainder of the point squad, including platoon commander Paul Nelson, were wounded. Another four Marines sustained injuries and could no longer fight. Tom Livingston, Platoon Sergeant of Third Platoon, replaced Nelson as platoon commander. Doc Hammergren had run out of bandages and had to use pieces of torn clothing to dress wounds. He also needed water to continue tending to the wounded Marines.

Major and his command group went forward to Nelson's position. Major was concerned about losing Nelson, a dependable leader. With only a few hours of daylight left, the company still had some major tasks to accomplish. "We had to get up and secure the ambush site," Major says. "From there, we had to figure out how the hell we were going to get the dead and wounded medevaced out. We were still in triple-canopy jungle."

The Marines found that the trail led uphill from the ambush site to the top of the little knoll. The trail crossed the knoll to the other side. It was the only relatively flat and open space in the jungle. "It was like a bump in the hillside," Lewis says. "It had some trees, but we could see out across the valley. It wasn't very wide."

The knoll was the best site available to bring in medevac helicopters, but it was far from ideal. Trees had to be cleared fast. It

quickly became apparent that this would be a big project: C-4 would have to be used to blow the vegetation clear.

Major looked at Nelson and said, “Paul, it may take a while, but we’re going to get you out of here.”

“It was reassuring to hear that from him,” Nelson says. “I was in so much pain that I was just hanging on. I wondered what it was going to take to get me out of it. It was a nightmare. It was a lifetime waiting for that helicopter to come in.”

Nelson started asking his men about KC. He knew the point man was lying nearby and that a lot of people were around him. “He’s OK.

Don’t worry about it,” the others told Nelson. But he could tell by the way they said it that Cahill wasn’t OK.

Cahill’s sudden death stunned many of the Marines who knew him. He was a likable Marine with a great sense of humor and a strong Boston accent that often made the others laugh. “K.C. would do anything for anybody,” says Krisko, who was in Cahill’s fireteam. “He was a Marine’s Marine. He was always at the front. Always. Before he would send you, he would go.” Cahill didn’t have to be walking point; it was an assignment he volunteered to take.

Antal saw one Marine in particular approach Cahill: “It must have been his best friend who went up there. He went up to Cahill and lost it. He was crying over his body. I thought it was his best friend but it might have been the corpsman. He was weeping over him saying: ‘No… No…’ It might have lasted about a minute, which I thought was a long time. An officer came up and physically had to remove him.”

Engineers, who had TNT and C-4, began blowing up large trees. Helicopters arrived and lowered chainsaws to take care of smaller ones. Some Marines tackled other trees and brush with axes. NVA scouts, hidden in the dense jungle, watched as the Marines worked to clear a site for the helicopters to land.

Just because the ambush had ended didn’t mean the Americans were safe. Ruffer’s First Platoon dug into their positions on the high ground behind the ambush site. Sgt Livingston’s platoon moved around to defend the front perimeter of the knoll, opposite of where the trail crossed it. Lieutenant Anderson’s Second Platoon spread out in the area of the ambush and trail.

Antal, Boxill, and Cole helped set up the perimeter defense around the knoll. The men took positions five to six yards apart by a fallen tree at the edge of the newly made clearing. The clearing was near

the trail's exit on the opposite side of the LZ from where the ambush had occurred. Boxill was on Antal's left. Combat photographer William Perkins, whom Antal had never met, took a position to his right. Perkins carried a motion picture camera around his neck and was armed with a .45 pistol. They positioned themselves to look away from the LZ into the surrounding forest. From their elevated positions, the Marines were on high alert and kept an eye on the field of fire as they talked. Antal was armed with his M16, three LAAWs, ammunition, and grenades. Boxill was ready with his M16 and extra ammunition.

Because of the tension, Antal struck up a friendly conversation when Perkins crouched next to him.

"Where you from?" Antal asked.

"California."

Antal began pestering Perkins with questions: "What's surfin' like? Are the waves big? Are there hippies out there?"

The two men didn't talk about Vietnam. The purpose of the conversation was to take their minds away from their present situation. "He could have been from Timbuktu and I would have acted the same way," Antal says.

Antal turned to Boxill and said, "Hey, this guy's from California."

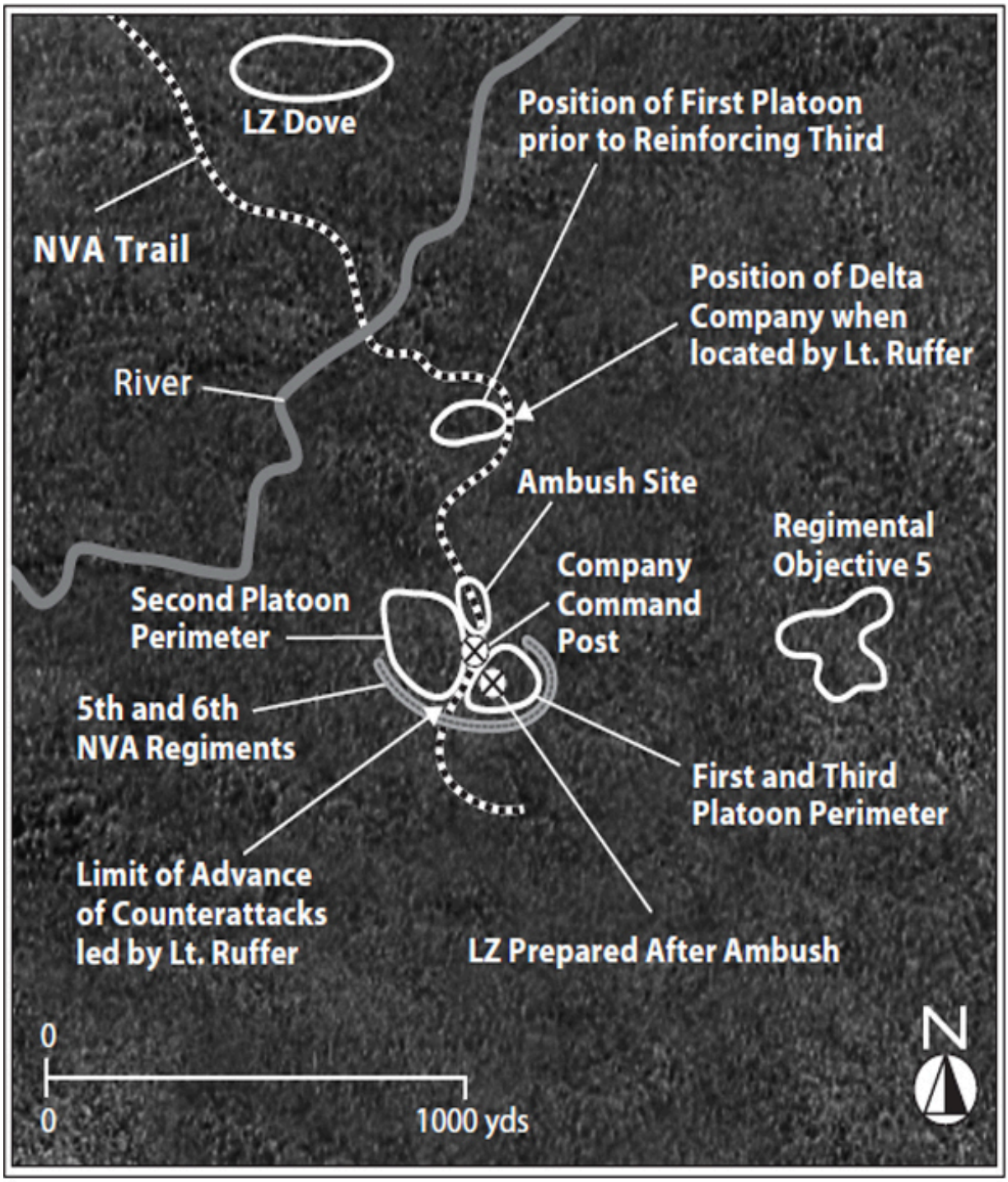
"Yeah, OK," Boxill replied. He wasn't interested in conversation. He was watching for the enemy.

Perkins didn't stay in one spot. He put his pack and some other equipment next to the log where Antal and Boxill were. He got up, talked to other Marines, and took photographs. He then came back and leaned against the fallen tree. Antal and Boxill remained at their positions, watching the jungle in front of them and keeping track of the progress on the construction of the LZ. Zorn, Yates, Coss, Dougherty, and others helped place the dead and wounded on the LZ to await evacuation and tried to help clear a landing zone.

The open LZ provided plenty of light for the men to work in. The Marines seemed to be winning their race against darkness. But they faced another stubborn foe: one large tree remained standing at the edge of the LZ. The explosive blasts shattered its trunk, but it would not fall. The Marines attacked it with axes that bounced right off. A group of men joined forces and tried to push it over, but it would not fall.

They had survived a dangerous march and a deadly ambush. Now

the American progress was being obstructed by a single tree.



Operation Medina, Charlie Company, 11-12 October 1967, Hai Lang National Forest, Republic of South Vietnam.

10 The Dusk Assault

Necessity is the mother of invention. For the men clearing the LZ, those words rang true. The first medevac chopper would arrive within minutes, but it wouldn't be able to take out the wounded. One stubborn tree blocked its way.

Captain H.L. Eisenson, the chopper's pilot, was in radio contact with Captain Mike Lesnik, the Forward Air Controller, and leader of the TACP attached to Charlie Company. When advised of the problem, Eisenson told Lesnik, "I'll take care of it."

Eisenson brought his UH-34 in and hovered over the tree. Slowly, guided by Lesnik on the ground and the chopper crew chief, he maneuvered the wheel of the aircraft toward the top of the tree. The situation was fraught with peril. One minor pilot error might cause the blades of the helicopter to strike a tree. If that happened, the chopper would crash onto the jungle floor, erupting in a ball of flames.

With Bill Perkins filming the scene, Eisenson carefully lowered the helicopter so that the right wheel was parallel to the trunk of the tree. Then, almost as if he was flicking a giant wrist, the pilot smacked the wheel hard against the tree. The trunk snapped at the base and toppled clear of the landing zone.

Even with the trees gone, the LZ was still confined and dangerous. It measured a mere 80 to 90 feet in diameter. Only one medevac could come in at a time, and that helicopter could not fully land. The pilot could put the helo's front wheels down, but the elevation of the hill falling off behind the LZ would not allow the pilot to drop the craft's tail section to the ground. Eisenson brought the helicopter down until it hovered slightly above the knoll, its front wheels barely touching the jungle floor.

Bill Major watched the pilot's skillful landing with admiration. "I still don't know how he landed on that LZ," Major says. "The rotors were not more than a foot or two from trees that were two feet in diameter. I fully expected one of those rotors to hit a tree. If that happened, the rotor would have snapped and the helicopter would have crashed and burned. To come in, under full power, with just the front wheels touching the ground, was amazing."

The rotor wash and horrendous noise blasted the men like a hurricane. But as the front wheels touched down, the men on the

ground acted quickly. Perkins filmed the scene as stretchers were thrown from the helicopter to the waiting men. Larry Dalrymple, another correspondent attached to Charlie Company for the operation, also documented the scene. The wounded lay waiting. Cahill's body lay wrapped in his poncho. TACP radioman Scott Thorne, Scott Camil, Steve Kane, George Dougherty, and others helped load the Marines onto the chopper, the wind whipping them as they approached the aircraft, the lethal chopper blades whirring just feet over their heads.

One wounded Marine lying on a poncho was quickly loaded. Doff Edwards and another man, both on stretchers, were next. Lieutenant Nelson was then carried to the chopper on a poncho. As Nelson was brought to the side of the chopper, one of the crew members told him to grab the back of his neck as he pulled Nelson in.

"They were very good at what they did," Nelson says. "They made me as comfortable as they could."

The helicopter was quickly back in the sky. The four most seriously wounded men were aboard Eisenson's chopper and on their way to a hospital.

In the chopper, Nelson gripped Edwards' arm for support. Nelson was sure the helicopter was going to be shot down. *Please God,* he prayed. *Don't let them shoot us down.* Nelson was not a spiritual man. But he knew he was already lucky to have survived the ambush. He also knew choppers flew slowly and were easy targets, especially since the surrounding area was filled with enemy soldiers. He prayed fervently in those first few minutes.

Nelson learned a valuable lesson that day: "Rather than wanting God there when you desperately need Him, we ought to be a little more in touch with Him all the time," he says.

The helicopter whisked its patients out over the South China Sea. Because Nelson was in intense pain, the ride seemed like a lifetime. Eisenson continued to show his skill as a pilot. He expertly landed the helicopter on the very small flight deck of the hospital ship amidst heavy winds that both buffeted the aircraft and rocked the ship.

Nelson was taken off the helicopter and wheeled into a compartment (the Navy term for room). A chaplain appeared at his side and, for a moment, he thought the clergyman was there to read him his Last Rites. Instead, the hospital attendants went to work.

They cut off Nelson's clothes and, in a rough manner, forced the Lieutenant to lie on his wounds as X-rays were taken. The experience was excruciating.

Despite his agonizing pain, Nelson had to wait on a gurney for his turn. Wounded Marines and Navy men from throughout I Corps were being treated ahead of him. Finally, Nelson was wheeled into surgery. The doctor looked down and said, "OK son, we're finally going to put you out."

"I could have kissed him," Nelson remembers. "Those were the kindest words that you could have imagined." Nelson watched as fluid flowed through the intravenous tube in his arm and *poof*, he was out.

Back at the hastily carved LZ, helicopters continued to ferry wounded men out. The men with the most serious wounds were taken out first. Cahill would be taken out last.

The top of the knoll was gutted – it had been roughly cleared of vegetation by axe and explosives. The knoll wasn't totally flat but had a gentle, even rise to its center. Around three edges of the LZ, the ground dropped off in a forested slope. The trail crossed along the west edge of the LZ after entering from the original ambush area. It passed between two bomb craters that were the result of earlier bombing runs. Behind the trail rose a steep hill.

Jack Ruffer remembers that the terrain resembled a giant pear: If a pear were laid on its side with the neck to the right, and an object placed under the neck to elevate it about 30 degrees, it would resemble the Medina terrain. The round bottom portion of the pear was the knoll where the LZ had been carved out, around which Third Platoon was setting its perimeter. The south side of the LZ was now the Marine "front." The raised neck represented a steep hillside overlooking the LZ. The trail that the men had taken to the LZ knoll from the ambush site cut across the neck and disappeared into the forest on the south side. Turning left some twenty or thirty meters after it crossed the LZ, the trail led in the general direction of Regimental Objective 5.

As late afternoon began giving way to early evening, Dowd boarded the last helicopter out. Kevin Cahill's body was loaded first, and Dowd followed. The Marines watched the chopper lift off then turned to tend to their other duties. A defensive perimeter was being established around the LZ, and a squad was preparing to follow the

trail into the forest on the south side of the LZ. The squad was planning to scout the Marines' intended path to the regimental objective.

Ed Yates, Second Platoon radioman, was positioned back where the NVA trail intersected the path the Marines had cut through the jungle. At least one squad from Second Platoon was guarding the trail all the way to the LZ. Yates was with M60 machine gunner Robert Headrick. Headrick was the tough Hell's Angel who had earned the nickname "Sanitary Bob" because he always kept himself meticulously clean.

"Sanitary Bob was larger than life," Dougherty recalls. He stood 6 foot 1, weighed 180 pounds and had a muscular build. He wore an earring in his right ear, had rugged good looks and, in a fight, was steady as a rock.

As Yates watched the last chopper rise into the air, Headrick pointed and said, "I saw something move in that tree."

Yates looked up.

"I don't see anything…" he began.

Before he could finish, bullets tore from the barrel of Headrick's machine gun. With the M60 held at his waist, he fired high into the trees. A dead NVA grenadier tumbled out and struck the jungle floor.

At the same time, the door gunner on the departing helicopter let out a torrent of machine gun fire into the jungle around the LZ. Small arms fire cut through the forest. The NVA were back. From his vantage point, the gunner in the chopper had seen the enemy closing in on Charlie Company from the south and southeast sides of the LZ.

"He almost smoked his weapon laying down on the trigger," Dowd says. The red tracers of American weapons burned like hot flames against the darkening sky. Tracers are illuminated rounds that help soldiers see where their rounds are landing. The enemy responded with a blast of small arms fire at the helicopter, creating a line of greenish-white tracers rising up to the chopper.

The enemy had used the noise of the helicopters to conceal their movements and creep in on top of the Marines. Greenish-white tracers rose up from the brush well below the LZ.

The ground troops were soon involved. Within minutes, the enemy unloaded their weapons on the men of Charlie Company, who returned fire. Another battle had begun.

Rod Lewis was standing on the LZ when the attack came. As he

dropped to the ground, he saw the squad that was preparing to investigate the NVA trail get hit hard by enemy fire. He heard screams from the men as grenades rained down.

Dan Snell was not with Second Platoon when the assault came. He hit the deck with the men of Third Platoon on the perimeter on the south edge of the LZ.

Oh shit, he thought. *Here we go again.*

Snell didn't stay at that position long. A minute later, he was ordered to go down the trail, get the men who were wounded in the first burst of gunfire, and carry them to safety near the center of the perimeter. It was starting to get dark, and Snell could just make out shadows of his fellow Marines as he ran through the thick-canopied jungle. He came across a Marine lying face down on the trail. When Snell grabbed the man's arm to roll him over, the man made a gurgling, whistling sound. Snell and three others each grabbed an arm or leg and hurried back toward the LZ amid a constant spray of bullets.

Despite the constant thump of grenades and the blast of gunfire, Snell focused on the sound the man made: *Slosh, slosh, slosh, slosh.* The Marine had been shot through the lungs and possibly the heart. The sloshing sound was a result of blood moving in the dead man's chest cavity.

The men laid the Marine down on the LZ. Snell dropped to the ground and tried to make himself as flat as possible. Now he focused on different sounds: whistles from the enemy. Shouts of "Here they come!" "Incoming!" "Grenades!" Leaders shouting orders to their men. The steady *thump, thump, thump* of grenades. He slowly made his way toward some men from Second Platoon to the rear of the LZ.

Doc Hammergren found a Marine wounded in the initial attack. He knelt down and opened his Unit One. But the working conditions were dangerous: gunfire continued to explode around him. He saw North Vietnamese soldiers hanging from trees and firing their weapons. The NVA often used the bodies of dead and wounded men to conceal themselves as they infiltrated a perimeter. Since corpsmen were usually seeking out the wounded, they were always in danger of being targeted.

Hammergren worked frantically to dress the Marine's wounds. Suddenly, he got an eerie feeling. He looked up and saw a North Vietnamese soldier, loaded down with grenades, sneaking through

the foliage next to him. For a moment, Hammergren froze. A jolt of fear shot down his spine as the enemy soldier turned and stared at him.

It's him or me, Hammergren thought.

He pulled his .45 from his hip. At the same time, the grenadier rushed the young corpsman. Hammergren fired. The soldier fell on top of him, dead. Shaken by the incident, Hammergren pushed the corpse off, put away his weapon, grabbed the Marine he was working on, and moved away from the area.

PFC William T. Nelson was a Tennessean with Second Platoon. He was with a squad assigned to defend that portion of the trail that led back to the path the Marines had cut earlier in the day north of the LZ. When the North Vietnamese attacked, he was standing where the trail intersected the LZ above the ambush site. He was cut down by a blast of AK47 fire across his abdomen and chest.

Doc Hammergren rushed over and tried to stem the bleeding, but the normal techniques weren't working. Amidst the confusion and peril of combat, Hammergren decided to perform open-chest surgery on Nelson. He knew he had to take the chance or Nelson was a dead man.

Through his radio, Yates relayed instructions to Hammergren from a battalion surgeon who was on a hill behind Charlie Company. Hammergren worked furiously to stem the bleeding. Miraculously, Nelson was still alive when the corpsman finished. Hammergren filled the wounded Marine with more morphine, but Nelson rolled over onto his side. Hammergren rolled him on his back, afraid that Nelson would tear his stitches. Nelson kept rolling back onto his side. Hammergren asked the battalion surgeon what to do. "If he's more comfortable on his side, just leave him," the surgeon said.

As the Marines responded to the NVA attack on the south side of the LZ – the area extending out from the far side of the lower half of the "pear" – intense fire erupted from another flank (the southeast side), and then another (the east side). Strong, unceasing automatic weapons unloaded a constant stream of bullets on the Americans. This wasn't an ambush. It was a full-scale attack.

It was now dusk. Visibility was poor. In five to ten minutes, it would be completely dark. With the amount of enemy fire directed at the helicopter alone, it was obvious that the Marines had a tiger by the tail. The enemy had moved in on them in great strength. Charlie

Company was almost completely surrounded on top of that little knoll by an enemy that outnumbered them three to one. It would take every ounce of their courage as Marines to survive.

One of Seymour's 60mm mortar squads, including Boze, Walton, and Gibson, crawled underneath a fallen tree at the edge of the LZ. They set up their equipment in the crater closer to the center of the LZ to allow clearance for the mortars over the Marine positions and trees. The crater was about six and a half feet deep. It had been blown out of the earth by a 750-pound bomb. Off to Boze's left flank, Cpl John Lee dove to the ground as the firing intensified. Nearby, Scott Camil and his radioman Steve Kane tried to conceal themselves behind the stump of the fallen tree at the crater's edge.

Bill Major and the command group crouched in the other crater. The battlefield was chaotic. Marines were getting hit and yelling for help. The gunfire and grenade explosions were deafening. Third Platoon was getting hit from three sides. Positioned near the ambush site, Anderson's Second Platoon was not hit. Jack Ruffer's First Platoon had earlier moved into the high ground some one hundred and fifty meters north of the LZ. Captain Major had ordered them to clear some fields of fire for a company-size night defense, to which the rest of the company could withdraw after they disengaged. First Platoon had yet to be attacked.

The Marines would be slaughtered unless they reacted quickly. This would be the true test of Marine training and leadership. If their commanders panicked or made poor decisions, all would die. If the riflemen panicked or didn't do their jobs, all would die.

Bullets snapped and whizzed around Major as he listened to radio reports saying that the enemy was moving toward the Marines' perimeter defense. Both sides were firing in heavy volume. The skipper knew the fighting was intense, but he believed Charlie Company could hold its own without risking the lives of Delta Company. However, he wanted to make sure he had a backup plan.

He called Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti over the radio. "We're being hit hard from the front (south side), sir," he said, "but we can hold them. Would like to know if you can send Delta Company to reinforce if we need them."

"Affirmative," Belbusti replied. "They are ready to go any time you need them. Let me know." Belbusti put Delta Company on alert.

Major immediately decided to go on the defensive. Going on the

offensive and executing a flanking maneuver was out of the question because there was no place to move. The jungle was thick and light was fading fast. The men could not see each other or the terrain well enough to move in an organized fashion.

Major made sure that Second and Third platoons were in communication with each other. Through this contact, Major ascertained the direction of the attack. He also realized how precarious the Marines' position was: the enemy had crept in so close to the Marines that supporting arms like artillery or mortars could not be used effectively without risking American lives.

Major knew that the NVA's strategy was ominous. "During the initial ambush, the main objective of the enemy was to inflict casualties on us and to slow us down," he says. "On the evening of the main attack, there is no doubt in my mind that their objective was to overrun us. They kept coming at us. The purpose of the ambush was to stop us, which they did. That evening, they tried to wipe us out."

The skipper wanted the Marines to have a strong defensive line to their front, so he ordered Gunny Thompson to Third Platoon to make sure that the men were well positioned. He ordered Second Platoon to occupy the high ground on the steep hill above the trail on the west side of the LZ. Second Platoon had to keep the back door (right flank) closed so that the NVA could not surround and cut off the company.

Thompson quickly reported back that there were not enough men in Third Platoon to hold off the NVA onslaught. They needed reinforcements fast. Major got back on the radio to Lieutenant Ruffer.

"Get down here!" he commanded.

First Platoon was one hundred and fifty meters from the fighting and still digging in. "Get your gear!" Ruffer yelled to his men. "Get up! We're going in."

He knew they had to move fast. If the NVA were closing in, they could try to stage another ambush to cut off the trail First Platoon had to take, the one leading from that afternoon's ambush site to the LZ. First Platoon would be cut off from the rest of the company, and the NVA would easily be able to move around to flank Second Platoon and surround the rest of the company.

"Take off and don't stop!" Ruffer ordered.

As they ran, there was still a little light to guide them. It was dusk in triple-canopy conditions. David Welsh, a squad leader in First Platoon, had just been at the LZ a few minutes earlier. Ruffer yelled to him sharply, “Go! You know where it is!”

Welsh and his men ran down the trail, leading the way toward Third Platoon’s position. On the way down, NVA soldiers hidden in the surrounding foliage called out, “Hey! Over here, Marine, over here!” But for some reason they didn’t fire on the fast-moving Americans. The Marines didn’t fire at them either, wanting to get to their comrades instead.

As Welsh and his squad got close to Third Platoon’s position, he heard another NVA soldier call to the Marines: “Help me! Over here. Help me! Over here, Marine!”

“They were baiting us,” Welsh said. “I can’t tell you how close they were but to me, they couldn’t have been more than 10 yards off. I don’t know why they didn’t shoot.”

Ruffer saw dead NVA on the trail as he ran, including one body that had been decimated by the intense battle following the ambush.

Seymour and his men started putting mortar fire out just beyond Marine lines in the direction of the heavy fire. But it was hard for them to know where to fire because enemy rounds were coming in from almost all directions and in substantial volume.

Seymour crawled over to Major and the command group to see if the mortars were hitting enemy targets. Enemy grenades seemed to be coming at them from inside the Marine perimeter, but Boze, Gibson, Walton, and the other gunners continued to fire their mortars into the forest.

Walton peered over the edge of the crater to get a better view of the battle. A grenade exploded nearby, and a piece of shrapnel slammed into his head. The force of the impact threw him to the back of the crater. He began to scream. The top of his head had been blown off, but he was still alive.

Trying to flatten himself to the ground outside the crater, Kane couldn’t see inside the depression. He heard loud, agonizing screams that didn’t die down – scream after scream after scream. *Jesus Christ,* Kane thought. *That guy’s going to be a magnet for grenades. They’re going to zero in on us.*

Inside the crater, Boze and Doc Hammergren worked furiously on Walton’s head wound. Walton continued to scream at the top of his

lungs, delirious.

Outside the crater, two grenades fell a few feet from Kane, blowing him into the air twice in quick succession. He felt sharp pain in his ears, and the explosion blew so much dirt into his eyes that for a moment he thought he'd been blinded. But his eyes cleared, and he checked himself for injuries. All his limbs were intact – the concussion grenades contained little shrapnel, so he escaped serious injury.

The second one had landed closer to Camil, sending shrapnel into his legs. His leg instantly went numb, and for a moment he thought it had been blown off.

"Kane," he screamed. "The bottom of my leg – is it still there?"

"Your leg's still there," Kane shouted back. "You're all set."

Reassured, Camil ignored the injury and went back to his task of calculating the enemy's location. Kane pulled out his two grenades, pulled the pins, and lobbed them in the direction of the incoming grenades. An NVA soldier had remained hidden in a tree within the Marine perimeter and had been dropping grenades on the mortar position. After throwing his grenades at the soldier, Kane crawled up to the edge of the crater to investigate why the Marine was screaming.

"He's been hit in the head," Boze explained as he tried to calm the wounded Marine.

Gibson crawled to the command group to tell Seymour that Walton was seriously wounded. In the meantime, Doc Hammergren gave Walton morphine. He lapsed into unconsciousness and died.

Doc Hammergren had almost exhausted his supply of bandages and water. The men in the crater gave him what they had, but more was needed. Boze crawled out of the crater and went man-to-man, collecting water and first aid kits for the corpsman. Off to his left, about twenty feet, Boze thought he saw a wounded Marine move. He crawled to the man, hoping to drag him to Doc Hammergren for treatment. When he reached him, Boze found that the man was already dead. Boze stripped him of his 782 gear, took his .45 pistol and ammunition and crawled back to the crater. The dead Marine was Cpl John Lee.

The NVA assault seemed to come from all directions and take many forms: grenades, rifle bullets, and machine gun fire. There was nowhere for the Marines to hide.

George Dougherty had been in firefights before, but nothing like this. The roar of battle was unlike anything he had ever experienced. The uninterrupted fire sounded like the hum of a giant bee rather than the on-and-off staccato that he was used to.

Mike Robinson saw that the Marines were surrounded and thought he was a dead man. *Well, I had a good life,* he thought. He said a couple of Hail Marys and Our Fathers. Then he asked God for forgiveness for all the things he had done wrong in his life. He didn't pray that he would live; he prayed that everything would turn out all right for every Marine there. "I hoped that God was willing enough to help us out here and maybe get us through it, or if I did have to die, maybe it was just my time to go," he says. "But I was going to do the best job I could until then."

Like many men in close combat, Robinson thought about those he might leave behind. He thought about his family and his home. He thought, *What's my family going to think if I do die over here? Why did I join the Marines?* He thought of good and bad times as scenes from his life flashed before him. Robinson was just 19 years old.

Hartranft had taken cover behind a tree stump on the LZ. "It was unbelievable," he says. "It was like you were right in the middle of a John Wayne movie. Boom! Boom! Grenade after grenade. Sometimes I think that the enemy must have had a thousand grenades."

The grenades seem to be coming right at the Americans. It took a few moments for the Marines to realize why the incoming grenades were not falling in the usual arc pattern. As Kane had discovered at his location, some NVA soldiers had tied themselves to the trees and were hurling the grenades straight down. Grenades were falling down and rolling everywhere among the Americans.

As darkness fell, the lines of red and greenish-white tracer fire became more brilliant. The enemy became bolder. Down the trail on the south side of the Marine perimeter, two squads of NVA soldiers broke through and charged straight at the Marines' tenuous position. A machine gun team headed by Cpl Sherman Betts fired its M60.

"They're coming this way," Betts shouted.

A moment later, a grenade exploded among Betts and his men. All were wounded, Betts with a severe back wound. But he crawled to the gun and fired more rounds, keeping the NVA at bay. When he ran out of ammunition, he limped up the trail to the LZ, which was

exploding with bullets and splintered wood from the surrounding trees. He was not allowed to return to the gun; he was ordered to lie down and wait to be treated. [2]

Radioman Scott Thorne had been running ammunition to the machine gun team. When the enemy took out the team, he dragged some of the wounded men to a safer position and scrambled for cover. He found himself near the log at the center of the south side of the perimeter where Antal, Boxill, Cole, Perkins, and others were firing down into the forest. He saw the Marine next to him stand to fire off a round, then crouch back below the log. When the Marine stood to fire again, a spray of enemy bullets hit him. Thorne lobbed his last grenade in the direction of the enemy fire and killed the NVA soldier who had taken out the Marine.

George Hutchings and his fireteam were stationed at the juncture of Third Platoon and Second Platoon on the south side of the perimeter. From his position, he saw Third Platoon Sergeant Thomas Livingston take on the enemy. Livingston took positions behind trees, watched for the muzzle flash of an enemy sniper, then shot the sniper and moved to the next tree. The Marine's coolness under fire gave Hutchings and the other men courage to follow his lead.

It was now totally dark. Hartranft stayed crouched behind a tree stump on the LZ. His "walk in the park" had turned into a death stalk. "Death was stalking us all night long," he says. "The air that night was just lit up with bullets. Every square inch had to have its own bullet, either coming or going. By the looks of the motion of the trees, I thought that there were a thousand NVA out there. There was a lot of yelling and whistles, whistles, whistles."

It was the worst firefight Hartranft would experience in Vietnam. In the pitch darkness, he heard Marines yelling orders. He saw muzzle flashes that were brighter than Marine tracers, so he knew they were from enemy guns. The Americans would fire at those guns, and the enemy would fire back. But he noticed the situation was not out of control. It was more like controlled mayhem.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Hartranft observed something remarkable. The training, the esprit de corps, and the brotherhood in arms held the Marines together: "Picture yourself in a pitch-black setting, except for flashes of light. You have to know who the guy is on your left and on your right; you have to know their job, what they

have with them, what their duties are in your fireteam, where your squad leader is. These guys knew all of that. If they didn't, we wouldn't be here."

In infantry school, Marines are taught how to operate as a fireteam, squad, platoon, etc. Operation Medina was proof that the system works. When squad and fireteam leaders were wounded and no longer able to lead, somebody below them would automatically move up into their place. "The small-team leadership brought everything right under control. Lieutenant to sergeants to squad leaders to fireteam leaders to riflemen," Hartranft says.

Mike Robinson was part of the coordinated effort. When the Marine in front of him got shot, Robinson tried to help him. Robinson then pulled another wounded Marine out of the line of fire until somebody could help him. Scenes like this were repeated at sites across the battlefield. At that point, corpsmen were scarce.

From their position slightly down the hill from the south edge of the LZ, Antal and Boxill had their M16s on full automatic, firing magazine after magazine straight down at the enemy. The men couldn't see anything but knew where the enemy was from the line of greenish-white tracers that rose from the forest below and went about six feet over the Marines' heads.

While Boxill loaded his weapon, Antal would fire. While Antal loaded, Boxill would fire. That way, the stream of bullets coming from their position was continuous. The two men worked as a team, trying their best to outfox the enemy. They would pause for a moment, hoping an enemy soldier would think it was safe to crawl up toward them. Then they would pop up and shoot down the hill to surprise any soldiers who had drawn close. "I don't know if it worked or not," Antal says. "I didn't venture beyond our perimeter to look for dead NVA."

A Marine came up to Antal and Boxill and shouted, "Don't let this position get overrun!" Wounded Marines were not far behind their location.

Antal decided to fire a rocket. He fired a LAAW, then the forest in front of him fell silent. The Marines waited. Then all hell broke loose again, with intense fighting near another part of the perimeter. Someone yelled, "They're testing our lines!" The NVA were looking for a weak spot, a place where they could break through the Marine line.

“THEY’RE RUNNING ACROSS THE HILL!” Boxill shouted as the enemy tested the American perimeter. Antal heard explosions behind him. Marines screamed: “CORPSMAN!” Greenish-white tracers from enemy AK47’s continued to stream over their heads. Red tracers from Marine M60 machine guns flew down the hill. Then some red tracers also came up at the men. The enemy had captured an American weapon and were using it against the Marines.

The Marines were being hit from three directions. They heard another enemy whistle, and then more grenades rained down into the LZ. The NVA had the strategic advantage. They knew the terrain, and they knew the Marines’ exact location. The Marines had no idea where the communists were. But they did know the enemy could easily surround them and cut them off from their battalion.

The men fired everything they had into the jungle. They couldn’t see anything except for rifle flashes, so the mortar men shot illumination rounds to provide some light.

Mike Robinson passed down an order from Captain Major: “Don’t fire at just anything.” If the Marines ran out of ammo, they would be dead.

Down the trail near Charlie Company’s front line on the south side, machine gunner Cpl Jimmie Leonard was wounded. The rest of his squad was down. He stayed at his gun, firing relentlessly at an enemy machine gun down the trail, killing any NVA soldier who stepped forward to man the weapon. One by one, he picked off seven soldiers until there were no enemy gunners left. Leonard’s success made him a marked target. He was shot a second time and put out of the fight.[3]

Assault men Ron Coss and J.J. Zorn were fighting from behind a giant log at the head of the trail. They were not far from Second Platoon’s location on the perimeter. George Dougherty from Second Platoon was stationed nearby. The blast from a concussion grenade blew off Coss’ helmet. It rolled down to Dougherty’s position. He tossed it back up to Coss. Another blast and the helmet rolled off again. After Dougherty tossed it back for the second time, Coss tapped the helmet firmly in place and fastened his chin strap.

Suddenly, his M16 fell silent. “My gun’s jammed!” he shouted to Zorn.

“Clean it!”

Coss crawled across the LZ to where a dead Marine lay. He grabbed

a cleaning kit off the Marine's cartridge belt, crawled back to his position, and cleaned the jammed weapon. Soon he was firing at the enemy again.

Zorn watched wave after wave of NVA attack the Marine lines. Wounded Marines, some of them crying out for their wives or mothers, were strewn across the battlefield. A corpsman came up and asked if the men had any water to give the wounded Marines. The corpsmen were running out of water and morphine. Grenades were falling and bouncing all around Zorn's position. Heavy automatic weapons fire strafed them as the four men from the squad held onto their little piece of earth. The other two Marines at the position, Charles Edwards and Joseph Cook, had been wounded by fragmentation grenades. Zorn's ears were ringing from a concussion grenade. *There's no way I'm making it out of this one alive,* he thought.

Back at Delta Company

When the NVA attacked, the men of Delta were in a defensive position in the jungle behind Charlie Company's position. Glenn Griffin was with Jon Woodard, who had been in his squad since they both arrived in Vietnam. From that day forward, they were best friends. They liked the same music and sports and were about the same age.

It was dusk. Griffin and Woodard were preparing their evening meal. On this night, they were especially looking forward to a relaxing, hot dinner after trudging through the jungle all day with heavy packs and picking leeches off their exhausted bodies. Experts at cooking C-Rations, the two men were preparing a feast of beef and potatoes topped with cheese and hot sauce. The two men were set in along the side of a steep hill. They cooked on a little make-shift stove made from an empty C-Ration can. It held a heat tab that they shielded so its light couldn't be detected. They had pound cake and peaches set aside for dessert.

"We were going to have a hell of a meal," Griffin says.

Just as the two men were about to eat, Charlie Company got hit. With the shock of the attack, Woodard and Griffin accidentally knocked over their stove. Their long-anticipated meal spilled down the mountainside.

Then Griffin heard the ominous "whoosh" of mortars, the racket of small arms fire, and constant *thump, thump* of grenades. Rounds ricocheted up the hill where they stood. Griffin yelled, "Oh boy,

somebody's in the shit!" as he and Woody dived into a shallow fighting hole they had dug. They knew if Charlie Company got hit hard, they could be next.

Arrival of First Platoon

Minutes after being called by Captain Major, Lieutenant Ruffer's First Platoon was on the scene. Ruffer crouched at the place where the trail intersected the LZ and shouted to a nearby Marine, "Where's the CO?" Ruffer could barely see Major and the others in the crater. The men were trying to stay flat to the ground. Because they were on top of a knoll and the enemy had to fire upward at an angle, enemy gunfire was less likely to hit them if they remained close to the ground.

Even though Major was only 30 feet away, the noise of battle was so deafening that Ruffer had Mike LaVallee send a radio message to let Major know that First Platoon had arrived. Ruffer immediately began to move his men into the perimeter to hold the company front. Seeing that a radio operator wouldn't be needed at his side, he sent LaVallee to the command group, where he could help provide security and back up any other radio operator who became a casualty.

Ruffer saw greenish-white tracers coming up from all along the south side of the Marine perimeter. He heard the screams of NVA and Marine alike. He heard the shrill whistles of NVA officers as they directed their men in the attack. Ruffer quickly assessed that Third Platoon's front was weak and had to be reinforced. This was to the left and right of where Antal, Boxil, Cole and Perkins were positioned. Third Platoon had taken many casualties.

Sgt Salvador Bazulto led a rocket squad of five or six men. Ruffer ordered him to the front – across the LZ, and down the far section of the trail – to plug a hole in Third Platoon's defenses. Stan Blessing was also ordered up to the front.

Grenades began to rain into the LZ with renewed intensity. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* One exploded near Ruffer. It was at that moment he realized the Marines were facing an overwhelming force and that he wasn't going to make it home. He knelt on one knee and prayed, "*God, take care of Patty and the kids*".

"As soon as I said it, I felt this feeling of warmth and security," he says. "Not that I was going to survive, but that I was prepared to die.

Everything was much easier then."

Ruffer was a Marine Lieutenant, and he was going to do what Marine officers were supposed to do. "This was very important to me," he says. "I wanted to maintain the Marine tradition. You don't do that by getting behind the men and pushing them forward. You get in front of the men and say, 'Follow me!' You do what you are asking them to do. This meant that, as a Marine Lieutenant, I would be where the NVA wanted me. My chances of survival were low."

At a run, and sometimes a crawl, Ruffer made his way to the center of the perimeter's south side. He needed to see how the Marines were deployed. He moved to the front and positioned some men behind a log. He didn't know where all the Marines were, so he had to be careful where he directed fire.

He soon realized how difficult it would be to provide a strong defense. He was grabbing Marines to fill holes in the perimeter, but he couldn't see the Americans unless a muzzle flash or illumination round went off as he was looking. He would often discern a shadowy figure and say, "This is Ruffer. Who are you?" There weren't many men to put into position. Many were down – at least a dozen, probably more. Corpsmen were treating the wounded. Even wounded men were trying to return fire.

He sent David Welsh's squad forward to reinforce one section of the vulnerable Third Platoon. As soon as Welsh's squad got on line, the firing from the front intensified. More grenades came in. Holes in the line had to be plugged. Ruffer ordered Welsh to secure the flank by the trail that exited the far side of the LZ. Welsh had to make sure the enemy didn't cross the trail and proceed to the company's backside.

"No one is to encircle us," Ruffer commanded. "I mean it!"

Welsh and his squad took off down the trail. As Welsh took off, Ruffer shouted, "Don't bunch up so much!" Welsh repeated the order to his men, and they spread out as they moved forward in the darkness. When they reached the enemy line, grenades exploded right in front of them. Welsh could see that the enemy was moving around toward the trail and could easily slip around the east flank to the company's rear in the confusion of battle. He brought his men back and reported the situation to Ruffer.

Enemy Infiltration

Despite Marine attempts to fill gaps in the perimeter, NVA soldiers were getting through. An enemy grenadier was able to sneak to within 20 feet of Captain Major and his command post. Even though everyone was lying prone, the position of the command group was obvious. Radiomen were always a target. The cluster of radios with long whip antennas made it clear where the company leadership was located.

After the grenadier concealed himself behind some trees and brush, he made his first attempt to wipe out Major and his team. Kneeling on the landing zone, Gunny Thompson saw a grenade hit the log behind him and bounce off. He shouted, "GRENADE! INCOMING!" Thompson threw himself to the ground, but the grenade was already exploding, sending metal shrapnel into his arm, the blast perforating both eardrums. He writhed in pain for a few moments, then pulled himself up to resume what he had been doing – positioning a mortar for a fresh strike against the enemy. The grenade was concussion; not the deadlier fragmentation variety.

"If it had been a fragmentation grenade, I probably wouldn't be here today," Major says.

The enemy grenadier was a persistent soldier. Major could see his silhouette against the flashes of light and sparks as he pulled the pin on another grenade. He continued to lob grenades 10 to 15 feet into the air at the command group. Shouts of "INCOMING!" "INCOMING!" "INCOMING!" were constant.

The grenadier was not more than ten or fifteen yards from the command post. Major fired at him, emptying all seven rounds of his .45 caliber pistol. The grenadier persisted. Major grabbed a Marine and ordered him to fire at the enemy soldier. The communist would not go down. Gunny Thompson picked up an M16 and fired, unloading a full magazine in the soldier's direction.

Despite their efforts, the grenadier was able to throw at least six grenades at Major and his team. The concussion from one grenade bounced Major into the air. The deafening explosions damaged the ears of both Major and Thompson. Because of the blasts, Major and Thompson had to work the radio as a team. Even though the grenades didn't fill the air with deadly shrapnel except at very close range, the effect was very disruptive to the command group. "It made it very difficult to direct troops, to call in artillery and to get illumination going all while the enemy was closing in," Major says.

The fact that the NVA grenadier was able to creep so close to the command post told Major that he had a serious problem: a gap was being exploited. When First Platoon arrived on the scene, its members filled in where needed. The men then consolidated their ranks so that fireteams and squads from each platoon regained their small unit integrity and were working together again. Yet somehow along the front of the Marine perimeter where Second Platoon and the remnants of Third Platoon tied into each other – in the area where the trail exited the LZ – a gap had formed, leaving a vulnerable area where the enemy could infiltrate the LZ or work their way back to surround Second Platoon.

The skipper called on Jack Ruffer once again.

"Jack, I think we have a gap," Major said. "Plug the gap."

"Yes, sir!" Ruffer responded.

"Don't call me sir!" Major snapped.

Looking back, Major doesn't know why he didn't want to be identified. "It didn't really matter in the middle of a battle. Why I said that, I don't know."

On the east side of Charlie Company's perimeter, on the low terrain at the bottom of the LZ, SSgt Bill Cooley and his men had been firing into the jungle, trying to bait the enemy into shooting back. If the enemy returned fire, their position would be revealed. If the NVA were far enough from the Marine line, Cooley might be able to get some supporting arms to hit them. Suddenly, a fragmentation grenade exploded nearby. Cooley fell, wounded, but staggered to his feet and continued to fight.

Fighting at the head of the trail was even more intense. The TACP commander, Captain Mike Lesnik, was shooting down that trail when he got hit. Marines at that position were falling quickly.

Huddled in the crater on the LZ with the other members of the mortar squad, Boze tried a new tactic. Normally, the mortar crew consulted a small card that explained precisely how many "increments" of charges were needed for the mortars to land at a certain distance and at what level to elevate the tube that fired the mortar. But the enemy was too close to do things by the book. The long-distance mortar rounds were not effective. Boze picked up a mortar round, flipped off the "safety" switch, struck the round hard on its tail fin assembly to release a second safety mechanism, then heaved the round down the hill into the forest at the advancing

enemy. He threw several rounds in this manner, using the mortars as highly charged grenades.

Soon Boze and Gibson looked around the crater – there were no more 60mm mortar rounds. They grabbed their M16s and scattered into the trees to try to hold off the enemy advance. As they took up positions on the Marine perimeter, Seymour watched the NVA's battle plan unfold. Small groups of NVA soldiers would charge forward, firing everything they had. The Marines fired back. "The fire going out, the crescendo was heavy, heavy, heavy," Seymour recalls. The enemy soldiers would come eight to ten feet from the Americans, guns blazing, before taking some hits. Then they would retreat and reload with a seemingly endless supply of soldiers and ammunition.

Second Platoon: Holding the Life Line

While Third and First Platoons were locked in combat with an enemy bent on their annihilation, Second Platoon held a piece of ground vital to Charlie Company's survival. Major had sent Anderson's platoon to secure the hill overlooking the LZ so the enemy could not gain an additional advantage. Anderson and his men heard the ferocious battle waging below them and the wounded men crying out for corpsmen. Yet Anderson knew he couldn't take his men blindly into chaos below, not knowing where the Marines were and where the enemy was. He kept the hill secured from the enemy throughout the battle, giving the embattled Marines security at least on one side. The high ground overlooking the trail was the "life line" for Company C.

"Even though they weren't in the main attack, Second Platoon provided a crucial portion of our defense," Major says.

After going up the trail to bring in the dead Marine, Dan Snell was ordered back to Second Platoon, where the men were dispersed in a thin perimeter. The area was quieter than the fierce battle he had just come through. He took cover, armed with an M16 and some hand grenades.

Mark Anderson had his radio, but for the time being he was a rifleman holding the line. He had been working at the command post, but now he was one of the lonely Marines who held the thinly stretched perimeter of Second Platoon. He lay on his stomach with his rifle pointed outward into the jungle. In the dense forest, he couldn't see a Marine to his right, left, rear or front. "I'm sure there

were Marines ten to fifteen feet to my right or left but I couldn't hear them," he says. Anderson felt as if he were there by himself.

"I was scared shitless as I listened to all the crap going on everywhere else," he says. "Screaming, crying, guys getting shot, guys getting blown up. Pitch-black jungle was in front of me. The jungle was right up to the end of my rifle. There was no clearing. Somebody could have crawled up six inches away and I wouldn't have seen him. It made me feel vulnerable. If the enemy had come up to me, he could have crawled by on either side and I wouldn't have seen him."

He would occasionally hear a noise or two, but he knew not to fire unless he was fired upon. He knew from his training and from watching war movies as a kid that firing would give away his location.

The NVA had probed Second Platoon's position just as the dusk assault began and they continued to do so throughout the night.

"We were shooting at shadows and sounds," Snell says. "I don't know how many shadows we shot at. We just waited to see what would happen next." But Second Platoon saw little action; the enemy forces seemed to prefer to attack the Marines who were located on less defensible terrain.

Second Platoon was holding the line, but elsewhere things were getting desperate. More Marines were going down. Ammunition was low. The enemy was still firing on full automatic. Some Marines threw back enemy grenades and searched the bodies of fallen enemy soldiers or wounded Marines for more ammunition.

The men of Charlie Company were in dire straits.

Brave men die bravely,
but they seldom die for the flag or country.

“It is the fear of not doing our nation’s duty that overrides the physical fear. That somehow our actions will not live up to the legacy of those who have gone before. That somehow our performance in battle will leave the Marine on our left or our right in harm’s way.”

General Peter Pce USMC
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
Arlington National Cemetery

Memorial Day, 2006

11 The Hymn

Charlie Company's situation was desperate. The NVA had done everything right. Since the enemy soldiers knew where the trail led, they had been able to set up a deadly ambush and wait for the Marines to fall into the trap. The North Vietnamese also knew that after the ambush, the Americans would call in medevac helicopters to take out their wounded and dead. This distraction allowed the NVA to gather forces, attempt to encircle the men of Charlie Company, cut them off from the rest of the battalion, and hit them with superior firepower. At the time of the dusk assault, the NVA enjoyed a numerical advantage of three or four to one. Their plan against the Marines was working perfectly. Charlie Company was about to be annihilated.

As Captain Major ordered Lieutenant Ruffer to "plug the gap," Charlie Company's position became even more tenuous. The NVA attacked from the south, right of the trail and roughly where Second Platoon's left flank and Third Platoon's thinly manned right flank joined. Up to that time, that area had been relatively quiet. It was possible that yet another company of NVA soldiers had joined the battle against the already outnumbered Marines. Or maybe the enemy hadn't realized at first how vulnerable Third Platoon's right flank was. Either way, the Marines could not defend their position without strengthening that location.

The fate of Charlie Company now rested on the shoulders of the young Lieutenant. To fill the gaps, he had to take the fight to the enemy. He had to lead his men into the forest. He had to inspire his men to charge forward in what seemed like a suicide mission.

Ruffer walked into the LZ clearing. Like all Marines, he knew that the mission always came first. Drastic action was absolutely essential. But, like all Marine Corps officers, he wanted to save as many of his men as possible. The enemy grenades were dropping into the center of the company, including the area of the LZ where casualties were being treated by corpsmen. It was obvious that Ruffer's men had to counterattack to push the NVA out of grenade range.

Determined to carry out his orders, Ruffer looked around for Marines to lead. He couldn't find any. Except for those fully engaged in battle, those he could see were either dead, wounded or simply

dispirited. Their ammunition was running out. The enemy was attacking in great strength from three sides. Many Marines were sure that they were about to be overrun and slaughtered.

"It was obvious that we were down for the count," remembers Mike Robinson. "We thought we were going to die."

George Dougherty and Brad Foote swore to each other they would not be taken alive. With only two magazines of ammunition for his M16, Dougherty took out his KA-Bar knife and his .45, ready to use every last bit of firepower when the enemy overran his position. He knew he was going to die, but he couldn't help wondering *Where is the rest of our battalion? Where is the help?*

Dan Snell was convinced that 12 October 1967, was his last night on earth. "I thought that it was just a matter of time before we were overrun. It seemed like we just kept shooting, that ammunition was running low, and the enemy attacks were not slackening off." Despite his desperate situation, he couldn't help but admire the tenacious NVA. "The enemy was very, very brave," he says. "I have a lot of respect for the people who engaged us that night. They were very professional soldiers. They were young like us, but they didn't have the equipment that we had."

Rod Lewis and R.J. Jackson had holed themselves up behind a hollowed-out log. They felt a final enemy onslaught was imminent.

"It's like that train's coming," Jackson says. "There's no way it's going to stop."

Jackson thought back to the many movies he had seen depicting battles in World War II. In those battle scenes, hundreds of American soldiers would be lined up, all within eyeshot and earshot of each other. The scene in front of him couldn't have been more different. The men were scattered across the battle zone in small pockets concealed by dense foliage. They had no way of seeing how many of their comrades were left. They had only the sense that a larger, stronger enemy force surrounded them. They had no time to rest; they were constantly facing an assault. And they couldn't find cover to protect them from the battle. They had no place to go.

Jackson knew the enemy was too close for air strikes to be called in, so the men on the ground were the ones who would have to make something happen. Jackson felt he and the other survivors had to rely on gut instincts and do everything they could in their final moments.

The men were thirsty. Jackson had opened his last can of fruit cocktail earlier and now had no food or water. “I remember being so thirsty I could have sucked the spit out of a lizard’s lip,” he says.

Dennis Antal bit his tongue and lip to fight off the intense thirst; he had finished off the last of his water right before the firefight began.

The men were trapped. The Marines would hear whistles signaling a new attack, and then enemy firepower would increase, and grenades would rain down from the direction of the new assault. When George Boze noticed attacks on three sides, he knew the Marines were practically surrounded. “What can you do when you know that a whole company of Marines, approximately 140 men, are pinned down?” he says. “You know that there have to be more than 140 Vietnamese out there. We pretty much figured that we were dead.”

That realization had an empowering effect on some of the Marines. “Oddly enough,” Snell says, “once I realized that I was actually going to get killed, I was surprised to find that I was the calmest that whole night. Up until that time, I was worried about getting killed. After I realized that I was going to die, I figured if I shot at one more shadow or muzzle flash, maybe I would save the life of a Marine. Maybe I could stay alive for five minutes. I know I’m not going to make it, but if I fight back, I’ll stay alive a little bit longer.”

Other men drew strength from the spirit of their fellow Marines. Just when the NVA assault was at its highest, a wounded Marine yelled, “CORPSMAN UP! CORPSMAN UP!” Somewhere, with enemy bullets flying everywhere, a corpsman yelled back, “I DON’T MAKE HOUSE CALLS!”

“The only thing you could do was laugh,” Boze says. “It just broke everybody up. It took the seriousness away from the fighting to the point where everybody was laughing.”

When an NVA soldier called out, “MARINE, YOU DIE TONIGHT” one Marine yelled back, “HO CHI MINH SUCKS!” Steve Kane heard this and shouted back to the North Vietnamese as well. He knew that the enemy already knew where his position was and that he would probably be killed anyway. *If I’m going down, I’m going to say a few things on my way out,* he thought.

But despite the Americans’ best efforts to maintain their morale, the constant enemy fire wore down their hope. Some of the men couldn’t withstand the pressure. Jack Ruffer found a member of the

TACP curled in the fetal position at the foot of a tree, sobbing in fear. “Pull yourself together!” Ruffer shouted. But the man was so terrified he could barely function.

Phil Hartranft was sitting in the pitch-dark forest, thinking that his first combat would also be his last. Bullets tore into the tree stump next to him. Grenades were going off throughout the forest with a steady *whump, whump, whump.* Hartranft thought, *I think these guys are going to get us tonight.* He was 27 years old and thought he would never see his wife and two daughters again.

He said a prayer. “I think that everybody prayed,” he says. “There is something about a round snapping over your head or a grenade going off a couple of feet from you that brings you a little closer to the Lord.” The only way the men could see the battle was by the constant flashes from exploding grenades. And what they saw was not encouraging.

Mike Robinson saw enemy soldiers being jolted into the air when struck by American weapons. He heard their screams. Then he saw the dead NVA being replaced by fresh soldiers. Robinson knew the North Vietnamese were right on top of the Americans because there were dead NVA within the Marine perimeter.

The enemy’s constantly changing attacks disoriented Robinson. To his right would be chaos: flashing grenades, the roar of gunfire, men on both sides screaming. Suddenly, that area would fall quiet and chaos would erupt to his left. And then to the front. And then to the back. When each flank would fall silent, he thought, *Oh my God, is everybody dead?*

During one of the brief lulls, Phil Seymour pulled out a small green notebook that he always carried with him. He scribbled a note to his mother: “I’m sorry, I gambled and lost. Love you.”

Overwhelmed, outnumbered, isolated, and blinded by the dense jungle, the Americans knew they were going to die. Unless something was done quickly, their thoughts of doom would become reality. Jack Ruffer had to do something, anything, to stop the communist onslaught. If he didn’t, all of his men would die. So he drew the only weapon that his men had in ample supply: Marine spirit. He jumped to his feet into the line of enemy fire and shouted,

“LET’S GO GET SOME!”

Then, he drew a deep breath and, at the top of his lungs, began to sing:

FROM THE HALLS OF MONTEZUMA, TO THE SHORES OF TRIPOLI,

Robinson heard the singing amid the explosions and thought, *Are you out of your mind? My God, we're getting our ass kicked and you're singing the Marines' Hymn!*

George Dougherty was stunned to hear the song coming from Ruffer: *I'm too terrified to talk, he's singing the Marines' Hymn,* he thought.

What in the hell's going on? R.J. Jackson thought as he and Lewis remained crouched behind the hollow tree. He knew that the NVA would sometimes play recordings to demoralize troops and thought the song could be a trick.

But one Marine voice joined in, then another. And another.

WE FIGHT OUR COUNTRY'S BATTLES, IN THE AIR, ON LAND AND SEA.

Now Robinson thought: *Oh my God, this couldn't be better!* "It had to be mind-boggling for the enemy," he says. "They're thinking: *How can these Marines be singing?* Man, they must have thought we were crazy or nuts or something."

Jackson and the Marines around him started screaming "The Hymn". As more Marines joined in, the singing grew louder and louder.

FIRST TO FIGHT FOR RIGHT AND FREEDOM, AND TO KEEP OUR HONOR CLEAN,

"It echoed out there in the jungle," Robinson says. "It was just really cool. Even with the firing, stuff going off and things like that, it still got louder." As the sound swelled, so did the Marines' desire to live.

WE ARE PROUD TO CLAIM THE TITLE OF UNITED STATES MARINES.

"The Marines' Hymn made us fight better," Robinson says. "It made us say to ourselves, 'Hey, we're not going to die. We're not going to let them kill us.'"

Jackson says "The Hymn" was the exact right thing at the right time and credits Ruffer for an inspired act of leadership under extreme pressure.

"I imagine it would be like playing basketball with Michael Jordan. And you're down ten points with two minutes to go. And all of a sudden, he hits two threes in a row. And now you're down four. And

you say, hey, dang, you know what? We've got a shot."

"That one second of fear of dying, that one second of *this is the night I'm going to die,* went right out of my head when I heard 'The Hymn'," Hartranft says. "'The Hymn' brought us back to earth. I thought, *I'm here, and I'm going to make it through this.* From that point, we went from being on their terms to putting them on our terms."

"The Hymn" was even heard up the hill by the men of Second Platoon. Ed Yates heard the tune floating up over the din of battle. "I thought someone was crazy or gung ho as hell," he says.

Ruffer's plan was working. "I wanted to rally as many Marines as I could so that we weren't just lying there waiting to be overrun, and if it scared the hell out of the NVA, so much the better," he says. "We were going to get our pound of flesh."

Upon hearing "The Hymn", the surviving Marines, many of them wounded, grabbed whatever weapons they could find. "Unless you were dead, you had no good reason to lie there," Ruffer says. "Otherwise, all of us were going to be dead."

"Everybody perked up, and we started fighting harder," Dougherty says. It was his first good omen: "From that time on I thought we'd make it."

"The Hymn" signaled a turning point in the battle in more ways than one. The enemy was about to break through.

"To me, 'The Hymn' made me sad," Dennis Antal says. "That's when I knew that the perimeter and the rest of the company was in big trouble."

Suddenly somebody yelled, "They're in the lines!"

Away from the battle, Bill Guntor had just reached the bomb crater Charlie Company had passed before the fighting started. He heard the battle raging and countless rounds of ammunition being expended. Tracers flew through the trees overhead. *There's a hell of a fight going on,* he thought. Suddenly, through the commotion and confusion, he heard cheering and hollering and the Marines' Hymn.

"To hear that in the middle of the jungle in the middle of the battle was something you dream about. It was just not real," Guntor says. "It gave me chills; the hair on my neck stood up. I wanted to go up and join the fight. I thought they were counterattacking and kicking some ass. That's what I was hoping was going on."

That's exactly what was going on. About 140 Marines, many of them wounded, faced three or four companies of NVA, which

amounted to about 400 to 500 well-trained, motivated, and disciplined soldiers. Grenades were landing inside the perimeter at the rate of six or seven a minute. The outnumbered Marines attacked.

Dave Welsh saw that Lieutenant Ruffer was focused and ready to do whatever needed to be done. "I was ready to go," Welsh says. "The rest of the guys with me were also ready to go." When Lieutenant Ruffer said, "We're going to counterattack," the first person Welsh thought about was John Wayne.

Ruffer knew the trail that exited the LZ was the best way to get close to the enemy as fast as possible. Ruffer yelled, "LET'S GO CHARLIE!" and charged down the trail. His men followed.

"It was a very dramatic thing," Robinson says. "We thought that we were going to die anyway, so what did we have to lose?"

All the able-bodied men nearby charged down the trail. Ron Coss and J.J. Zorn left their positions at the rear of the LZ to follow Ruffer down the path. William Perkins got up from his position near the front and joined the charge, armed only with his .45. "I thought Lieutenant Ruffer was a lunatic," Zorn says, "but he got pride into us. We all started singing. I thought: *Oh crap… we're all gonna die. We might as well go together.*"

"Automatic weapons fire opened up on us unbelievably," Zorn continued. "The heavy rain of grenades became even heavier."

Welsh and his squad let go with everything they had. He had his M16 on full automatic and let all 20 rounds go. Since some of the enemy were in the trees, the men fired high and low. They sprayed the area with bullets.

Ruffer saw gaps on both sides of the trail. Some of the men moved out to the left toward where a hole between First and Third platoons had formed. The men didn't make it very far. Welsh had emptied his entire magazine into the enemy, so he knelt to reload. Just then AK47 fire sprayed the area. The Marines on both sides of Welsh were hit in the head and dropped to the ground.

Then, a grenade exploded next to Welsh's right knee. Scalding metal tore into his leg. A great deal of flesh was blown away. Welsh was knocked back to the ground. Another grenade exploded next to his head. His helmet saved his life.

Welsh was disoriented and losing blood fast. He turned around and staggered back toward the Marine line. He saw SSgt Cooley next to a

downed tree.

"I need a corpsman," he said. Cooley told Welsh to take cover behind the downed tree.

Welsh didn't think he could make it. His life flashed before his eyes. But those morbid thoughts lasted only a few seconds. He thought about family and friends. He vowed he was going to survive, so he headed for the downed log. Weak from loss of blood, his mind started to wander. He thought about the leeches from the river and how he didn't want them to crawl into his wound.

Distracted by that thought, Welsh made it to the fallen tree, but he couldn't lift his wounded leg over it. He was very weak, and close to losing consciousness. He knew if the enemy overran his position, they would shoot him to make sure he was dead. So he struggled to get to the other side of the tree so the enemy couldn't see him. His trousers were ripped and his leg was numb.

Cooley was shooting a .45 caliber pistol. When he fired, hot shell casings ejected from the weapon and landed on Welsh, searing into his wounded leg. The pain was agonizing, but Welsh couldn't move out of the way.

"I felt like my life was draining out of me," Welsh says. "I felt like a toy soldier who had been wound up, was going and going, and was going slower and slower." He knew what was happening around him, but time seemed to warp and he crawled in slow motion. *This is how it feels to die,* he thought.

But he desperately wanted to live. He looked around to see how he could help himself. He had no weapon. He had nothing.

"They're going to overrun us," he said to Cooley.

"I'm not going to let you die," Cooley replied.

As Robinson advanced with Ruffer, he saw a North Vietnamese soldier out of the corner of his eye. The man was heading right toward another Marine. Robinson shouted, "WATCH OUT!"

Robinson could see that neither the NVA soldier nor the Marine knew that the other was so close. Suddenly, the two men saw each other. They were two feet apart. The Marine got off a shot first, and the NVA soldier fell.

Brad Foote, George Dougherty, and other Marines near them also surged forward to plug the gap. The lines were full of activity. Marines were yelling, "COVER THAT FLANK!" "AMMO UP!"

As Dougherty charged forward through a rain of grenades, he felt a

stinging in his left hand and chest. In the darkness, he couldn't see why. Then a flare went off, and he could see he had been hit with shrapnel. During a brief lull, he found Doc Hammergren, who quickly bandaged his wounds and sent him back to his position.

At Ruffer's cry of "Let's go Charlie," Boze and the Marines near him climbed out of their holes and ran down the trail. They had long since run out of 60mm mortar ammunition. At this point, everyone had the same MOS: 0311, rifleman.

The first American counterattack was met with an overwhelming number of concussion grenades, fragmentation grenades, and AK47 fire. "It was like watching Fourth of July fireworks while they were going off around you," Boze says. "That forced us back." Boze and the others had gone only 25 yards down the trail before returning to their positions. Boze returned to his bomb crater. He hit the ground when he was 15 feet from the crater's edge. Even crawling on his knees would be suicide with the grazing fire from the NVA no more than 24 to 30 inches off the ground.

Throughout the night, Boze made repeated trips outside the crater. Crawling flat on the ground, he took ammunition, weapons, and medical equipment from the few dead men he found. Those still alive he dragged back to the crater.

Most of the others who had charged with Lieutenant Ruffer also resumed their original positions and continued to return fire.

The fearless Lieutenant didn't get far down the trail before he came upon a wounded Marine. He dragged the wounded man for a few yards by the yoke of his H-harness, a suspender-like device with padding over the shoulders that helped the men carry their heavy loads. But that was difficult. So he picked him up, threw him over his shoulder fireman-style, and carried him back up the hill to the LZ. He yelled for a corpsman; he could see the Marine was still alive.

Hartranft knew that the enemy's tactics meant that the Americans were badly outnumbered. He knew it was cocky of them to try to overrun Marines who had dug into their positions. "They had to be awfully confident that they could do the job," he says. "They were there for the kill. They wanted a propaganda victory. They were there to wipe us out. They weren't going to take any prisoners."

Hartranft was impressed by the heroism of the young Marines, many of whom were only 18 and 19 years old. "It had to be a hard thing to do to get up when that Lieutenant gave that order and sang

‘The Hymn’,” he says. “It had to be hard to charge into a thick forest and have no idea what is two feet in front of you. But they did. I’ll never forget that. To a man, when that Lieutenant told them to get up and go forward, they did it with no hesitation.”

Ruffer’s counterattack lasted 10 to 15 minutes, and then the volume of fire began to taper off. The Marines seemed to have killed or at least pushed back some of the NVA. There were sporadic rounds, and then it was quiet.

The volume of incoming grenades slowed. Ruffer had kept the Marines from being overrun and reduced the number of casualties from the constant bombardment of grenades. This was especially true near the center of the LZ where the wounded were being treated.

Ruffer’s counterattack had stunned the enemy. He took advantage of the short respite by strengthening the Marine’s position. He knew his men were still in peril. All the NVA had to do was make several attacks in quick succession, and they could easily overrun Charlie Company. He used the time to reposition his men and to redistribute ammunition from the dead and seriously wounded.

With the exception of an occasional illumination round or muzzle flash from a weapon, it was almost impossible to see. The Marines had to feel their way around. Ruffer could hear Marines encouraging each other: “How many rounds you got left?” “You gonna be all right?” “How bad you hit?” He could hear loud moaning coming from down the trail. A Marine who had been critically wounded during the counterattack lay dying.

Ruffer asked his men for information about their contact with the enemy: “Where are they? How many did you see? Which way were they moving?” He also painted an optimistic picture. “We’re doing fine,” he told them. “There is no way in hell they are going to overrun us. We just have to hold on a little longer.”

The men took comfort in Ruffer’s words. “I think the men actually believed me or they wanted very much to believe me,” he says. “The picture was not quite as pretty as I painted it to the men. I remember thinking: *God, I’m lucky to have these people.*”

The counterattack pushed the enemy back and expanded the Marine perimeter. The men, however, were spread thinly, sometimes as much as 15 meters apart. “I was amazed at how steadfast and committed they were to holding their ground alone,” Ruffer says. “Had I been down there, I would have wanted another Marine next

to me for moral support at least." Many of the men, like SSgt Cooley, were wounded, yet they refused to leave their posts. "The men were magnificent," Ruffer says. "Every man who was down there held his ground alone."

Ruffer noticed a gap between Third and Second Platoon behind the trail to the right of the perimeter, but Sgt Livingston from Third Platoon assured him the perimeter would hold. The steep terrain in that area offered the Marines an advantage so fewer men were needed at that location.

Ruffer had no option but to keep his men spread thin. If he drew them closer, the line would have big gaps. To reduce the gaps, he would have to reduce the size of the perimeter. But that would have brought the NVA back in grenade range. There were not enough healthy Marines to position troops the way Ruffer wanted.

Lack of ammunition was another crucial problem. After the first counterattack, Ruffer took an ammo count. Generally, the Lieutenant had always tried to instill fire discipline in his Marines. "You can do much better with one well-aimed shot than with a whole magazine fired on full automatic in the general direction of the enemy," he would tell them. But that advice didn't work on this operation. Because of the thick jungle conditions and low visibility, Marines were firing on full automatic because they couldn't see a target to fire a well-aimed shot. This wasted ammunition. As a result, the men were extremely low on ammo and wouldn't be able to hold off many more enemy attacks.

The dense vegetation also continued to be a problem. The Marines were limited on how far they could advance and in what direction. In some areas, they could move ten to twelve feet quickly and then suddenly they had to find their way around vines and trees. They could quickly become lost. "We didn't know if the bad guys were on the other side of those trees," says Ruffer. "I was very concerned about shooting Marines." The only way that enemy and friend could be distinguished was by the color of tracers being fired from their weapons.

The men were also in bad shape physically. Many were wounded and all were fatigued and thirsty.

During the lull, a medevac helicopter came in and attempted to take out the critically wounded. The helicopter turned on its landing lights so that the pilot could avoid trees and lower a litter to take out

a wounded Marine. Instead of helping the Marines see their battlefield, the rotors kicked up so much dust and debris, the Americans couldn't see anything.

The helicopter lifted off again, with some wounded Marines aboard. Ruffer watched the departing chopper, his mind racing about the next inevitable enemy onslaught. "Like all men, I was afraid I might turn out to be a coward," he says. "No man knows when he goes off to combat how he will perform. I had never faced anything like this before. Somehow you summon what is necessary to do what needs to be done."

As he waited for the enemy's next move, Ruffer positioned himself close to the center of the clearing so that he could react in any direction. He was armed only with a .45 pistol and his KA-Bar fighting knife: "Marine officers don't carry a rifle. We are leaders. We can't get involved in the firefight. We have to assess the situation and maneuver men to conduct the firefight. If it ever got to the point that I needed an M16, I figured that there would be plenty of them lying around."

Ruffer was responsible for the lives of the 40 men in his platoon, the men left in Third Platoon, the handful of men from Second Platoon who were on or near the LZ and nearly all of those who were attached. He had to lead correctly. He was relying heavily on his officer training from The Basic School at Quantico. "I was trying to pair up what I was seeing on the ground with my intuition and compare that with every 'school yellow' I'd seen during my time at Quantico. The 'school yellow' is how the Marine Corps says a situation should be handled. I was thinking about what I should do in terrain like this and what I would do and where I would be positioned if I was the enemy. It was mentally fatiguing."

The lull in the fighting did not last for long. The NVA had been stunned by the Marine counterattack, but it took little time for them to regroup. Other soldiers might have withdrawn altogether after the deadly Marine charge. It was clear to the North Vietnamese that these Americans would rather fight to the last man than give up an inch of ground. The Vietnamese, however, were professional soldiers. They knew that they still had an advantage in manpower of almost four to one. They would not be easily intimidated. Their plan was still a good one. With one more push, they might take the Americans.

Small arms fire erupted to the south side of the Marine perimeter, and Ruffer heard the shouts of Marines positioned in that area. Just as they had done prior to the dusk assault, the NVA used the helicopter noise to mask their movement and get close to the Marines. The North Vietnamese were attacking. Again.

Ruffer stayed at the edge of the LZ, reluctant to rush down to the front until he knew the scale of the attack. He realized the enemy was striking from the south and east flank but not from the north. The NVA hadn't yet surrounded the Marines. His charge down the trail on Third Platoon's right flank had kept the enemy from crossing the trail and moving around to the Marine's east and then north. Once the small arms fire developed to full battle, he knew he had to move around the battlefield, assess the enemy's strength, and determine the Marines' best defense strategy.

On the perimeter, the chaos followed a pattern. Someone would shout "Grenade!" A grenade would land, and the Marines would open fire in the direction the explosive had come from.

Ruffer moved near the perimeter of Boxill and Antal, located at a fallen tree slightly down the slope from the LZ on the Marines' southern perimeter. Cole was positioned about 10 feet behind, higher up the slope. Combat photographer Perkins had returned to the spot after participating in the charge. More and more grenades began to fall near the men. Ruffer made his way forward from Cole's position to the fallen log. Perkins was about 10 feet to Ruffer's right, so close that Ruffer could see the luminescent dial of Perkins' Sea Wolf wristwatch in the darkness. Beyond Perkins, Antal and Boxill were shoulder to shoulder.

From his position uphill from the fallen log, it seemed as if the enemy were standing on top of the hill rolling grenades down at Cole. One of them landed four or five feet to his right. In the flashes of illumination, Cole could see the strange object. It looked like a dog food can attached to a wooden handle. It was a crude, old-fashioned device like the ones on the television show "Hogan's Heroes." For a brief moment, he stared at it. Then, it exploded.

The blast picked Cole up and threw him in a summersault over the Marines below him and toward the advancing NVA. He had been shooting down the hill; now he was looking up it. He tried to crawl back up the slope but kept slipping backward. He realized he was caught in a patch of small, loose rocks. He moved to the side and

began to make his way back up. The whole time, as he moved diagonally up the slope, Cole thought that he might get shot by his own men, thinking him to be NVA.

As he made his way up, Cole thought he heard voices from the foot of the hill crying "HELP ME! HELP ME!" But a loud, painful ringing inundated his right ear. The grenade explosion had blown out his eardrum. He was conscious, but barely. Maybe he had imagined it.

He heard the cries again, more clearly. "Help me! Help me!"

He thought that another Marine had gotten blown down the hill, so he turned to rescue the American. As he moved down, somebody grabbed him roughly by the collar. Startled, he turned to see another Marine, who pulled him back up the hill.

"It's a trick," Cole's rescuer said. "They want people to come down there. If it's one of ours, we'll get him later."

Cole made it back over near Antal's position. Delirious from the constant ringing in his ears, Cole walked straight across the open LZ with tracers going in both directions, holding his ears and screaming in pain. Antal yelled, "GET DOWN, MIKE! GET DOWN!"

But Cole couldn't hear anything. He continued walking through the hazardous open ground. Fearing for his friend's life, Antal got up and pulled Cole down. Antal then led Cole to the area near the command post where casualties were being taken. Even though that area was only a few feet from his position behind the log, Antal found himself walking on ground littered with wounded Marines. *Oh my God! Where did these people come from?* he thought. *Something really bad is going on here.*

As he sat Cole down, Antal saw a Marine behind a tree, the same sergeant who had placed the ABC squad on the perimeter. Antal yelled, "ARE YOU HURT? ARE YOU HURT?" The sergeant wouldn't answer. Antal ran over to him, thinking he was wounded or dead. Antal noticed that the sergeant's uniform was still crisp and clean. *He's dead,* Antal thought. But the sergeant looked up at Antal and said, "Get away. Get away."

"He crouched down behind this tree and he wouldn't fire his weapon," Antal says. "He wouldn't do anything. He just freaked out, I guess."

Captain Major saw the same sergeant: "I gave him a specific order to rejoin his unit. I couldn't get him to budge."

The Grenade

Antal returned to his position behind the fallen log. The darkness was punctuated by flashes of explosions that lit the area like intense strobe lights. In one of these bright flashes, Antal looked up and saw the grenade. It was already falling, like somebody was throwing him a high pass. The intense light silhouetted the object for a moment against the black sky.

Perkins, lying flat next to Antal, also saw the falling explosive. He propped himself up with his arms and yelled,

"GRENADE!"

Ruffer had just stood up to lead the men forward again when he heard Perkins' warning. He dove for cover back behind the log.

The grenade hit the ground three feet from Antal.

For a moment, it didn't explode.

Antal thought, *Oh my God, this is it. It's over with.*

At that point, everything seemed to move in slow motion. Perkins kicked Antal with his leg as he scooped the grenade up and tucked it close to his body.

Then, the grenade detonated.

The blast lifted Antal off the ground like a rag doll. Shards of metal bore into his legs. The pain was excruciating, as if a hundred bees were stinging him at the same time.

"I'M HIT," Boxill yelled. Shrapnel had struck him in the groin.

For a moment, the two men were stunned by the explosion. Then, Boxill crawled over to Antal. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, God. It hurts," Antal responded.

Boxill looked at Perkins. "Is he all right?"

Antal looked at Perkins, who was lying motionless, facing in the opposite direction. He reached out to touch the young Californian, but he pulled his hand away quickly. It was covered with dirt and blood.

"Is he all right?" Boxill repeated.

Frightened, Antal didn't answer. He just stared at his hand.

From his position behind the group, Cole watched as Perkins gathered the grenade under him. *How could the guy do that?* he thought. *He's giving up his life, his family, everything.*

From a distance, Mike Robinson saw Perkins moving toward the grenade. *Where the hell is he going?* he thought. He heard the

screaming and then the explosion, as pieces of deadly shrapnel whizzed past him.

After the grenade detonated, Ruffer got up and continued to advance down the hill, unaware of what had happened to Perkins. He couldn't see very far to either side and didn't notice that the young Marine next to him didn't get up. Ruffer was trying to expand the perimeter and keep the casualties on the LZ out of grenade range. He re-positioned the Marines he encountered as he moved down the hill.

In the meantime, another Marine came over to check on Antal, Boxill, and Perkins. That man was quickly wounded himself before he could offer assistance. Then, a corpsman reached Perkins. Antal asked, "Is he all right?" The corpsman shook his head.

The corpsman examined Antal, whose legs were cut up. "You'll make it," he said. Boxill looked at Antal, saw blood running down his neck, and said, "Oh my God, you got hit in the neck!" He tried to make Antal lie down, thinking it was a serious neck wound, but it was only a slight cut to his chin.

Antal was more concerned with the wounds to his legs. He started feeling them for shrapnel, but succeeded only in shoving the metal shards deeper into his flesh. The pain was intense. "OW!" he yelled.

"It was like the whole war stopped just for that one minute so I could check out my wound," he says.

Then another grenade came in. The explosion was deafening. It knocked Antal back to reality. Despite their wounds, Antal and Boxill began to fire their weapons again. Antal didn't look over at Perkins.

Defending the Line

SSgt Cooley, stationed on the eastern edge of the perimeter, despite a wound to his lower arm, heard enemy movement down the slope in the heavy vegetation. At times, he could see the greenish-white flash of AK47 tracer rounds as the enemy probed for a weakness they could exploit. He quickly located Ruffer. The two men confirmed that NVA were moving to the south and east. The enemy seemed to be trying to encircle the Marines by moving around to the north side of the perimeter.

"Do anything you can to keep them from encircling us!" Ruffer ordered.

Once again the Marines heard the eerie enemy whistles. Grenades started to rain inside the Marine perimeter at the rate of six or seven

a minute. The NVA followed the grenade attack with an assault up the hill. The attack came from the south, where Ruffer was, and from the east, where Cooley was positioned. The North Vietnamese were closing in. From the light of an illumination round, Cooley could see them at the bottom of the hill.

Ruffer's Platoon Sergeant couldn't let the enemy surround the Marines. He had to do something. "Put on your gas masks," he ordered. "Hit 'em with tear gas!"

The Marines threw tear gas and white phosphorous at the NVA. Immediately, the gas blew back up the hill over the top of the Americans, covering the entire area. For a few moments, the Marines couldn't see because of the overwhelming cloud and bulky masks. They were helpless. They could only hope the enemy had been overcome and weren't about to attack their position.

"GAS! GAS!" The warning filtered up the hill ahead of the toxic cloud. Captain Major threw on his gas mask and dropped to the ground. He saw another Marine choking under his mask. It had gotten clogged with water during the river crossing. Knowing the man was going to choke to death, the skipper reached over and pulled it off.

Phil Seymour also heard the warnings. He didn't know whether the gas was from the Marines or the enemy, but he saw the white cloud floating across the LZ toward him. He thought it could be a nerve gas or blood agent that could kill or disable him. Seymour threw his mask on and tried to draw a breath. Nothing happened. His mask had also been ruined in the river crossing.

"I can still feel, taste, experience the panic in that second or so when I put the mask on and tried to inhale, and there was virtually nothing," he says. He tore off the mask and watched helplessly as the cloud drifted toward him. As it passed over, he recognized the familiar smell of tear gas from the many gas mask drills he and the other Marines had undergone. Luckily, at that point the gas was not strong enough to cause Seymour or the others around him any discomfort.

Grenades were now flying in a high arc through the trees and landing near the casualties again. The now too familiar greenish-white tracers of enemy AK47s flashed as the enemy attacked.

Ruffer had to counterattack again to push the North Vietnamese back. He grabbed any men he could find and charged down the trail,

following the same path he took when he made the first charge.

Zorn and Coss got up from their position behind the small log and charged with Ruffer. As he headed toward the tree line, Zorn noticed a squad leader from First Platoon off to his left. The Marine yelled orders to his men:

"GET ON LINE!.... GET ON LINE! "

"COME ON LET'S GO!"

"FORM UP HERE... FORM UP HERE!"

As the squad leader placed his men on the perimeter, an NVA soldier armed with an AK47 stepped out from behind a tree. The communist took aim and fired. "The Marine got stitched right up the chest," Zorn says. "I fired at the NVA. I think I got him. I told the Marine that he was going to be all right and called for a corpsman."

Zorn's efforts were in vain. That squad leader was probably Salvador Bazulto. Bazulto was struck in the chest by fire from an AK47. He fell face down near the trail entrance, his head pointing in the direction of the enemy. Additional bullets struck him in the head and right hand, but the young Los Angeles native was already dead.

George Boze, who had returned to the protection of his bomb crater after the first counterattack, got up and followed Ruffer for the second charge. "We had to do something," he says. "It was getting tight. We were running out of ammunition and we needed to break through." Of the 40 men who had joined Ruffer on the first charge down the trail, only about half could make the second attack. The others had been seriously wounded.

Dennis Antal and Fred Boxill lay wounded on the perimeter, but they did their best to keep the enemy at bay and support the Marines in Ruffer's charge. Antal loaded M16 magazines for the other Marines.

Boxill still had an ample supply of grenades. He handed them to Antal to lob toward the enemy. "I think that the grenades kept the enemy away from where we were more than the rifle fire," Antal says.

Ruffer and the other Americans continued down the trail. He saw a flash to his front. It was a friction fuse on a grenade. He dove for the ground. As he hit the jungle floor, the grenade went off. A second grenade, this one a concussion grenade, landed on his pack. It bounced up and detonated a few feet above the Lieutenant. Part of his lower body was shielded from the blast by his pack, pistol belt, canteen, and first aid packet. But the small of his back was exposed.

He was blown hard into the ground. He felt as if a giant redwood tree had fallen on top of him. His ears were ringing, and all he could see were flashes of whitish green and red lights. He struggled to his feet and made his way back to the Marine perimeter.

As the other Marines pushed down the hill, the enemy's volume of fire reduced almost immediately. Explosions from grenades diminished. Boze ran back toward his bomb crater, where Doc Hammergren was trying to save the lives of seven or eight men. Some, like Roger Walton, were already gone.

Boze tried to stay down and conserve his ammunition. "There was nothing to shoot at except muzzle flashes," he remembers. The NVA knew that the Marines would eventually run out of ammo. If Charlie Company wasn't relieved or re-supplied soon, the North Vietnamese would take them.

The Third Counterattack

The wounded Lieutenant struggled to the crater where the command post was located. He found Captain Major and informed him of the situation down front. Ruffer then returned to his vantage point close to the center of the clearing.

As the battle raged just a few feet from his command post, the skipper did his best to stay informed. "You can't make a tactical decision until you know what is happening," he says. He kept contact with his platoon commanders to a minimum so as not to interfere with their work. Major let the commanders assess the situation and report back when needed.

As the men fought, the Captain had to contend with grenades and small arms fire in his command post. He had to consider the critically injured. Could he call in a medevac? What is the ammo situation? Where is the enemy breaking through? How should the company be organized during the defense? All of this and more raced through his mind. At the same time, he had to keep Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti informed. Belbusti was constantly on the radio asking questions: "What's going on? What is the enemy's strength? What kind of casualties do you have?"

Major was blunt. After hours of fighting, many Marines were out of ammunition. The perimeter was thinly held. The Americans were holding, but with one more determined attack, the enemy might break through. What had seemed like a small ambush had erupted

into a battle pitting one company of Marines against almost an entire battalion of NVA soldiers. Charlie Company needed help, badly.

Over the radio, Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti asked: “Are you ready for Delta?”

“Yes,” Major said. “It’s time to be reinforced.”

“They’re on their way.” Belbusti said. The Battalion Commander raised Delta Company on the radio and said: “Get going.”

But Delta was on the next hill. Charlie Company would have to hold its own for at least 45 minutes with little ammunition remaining. Major was also concerned that the arriving reinforcements might be ambushed by the North Vietnamese who were attacking Charlie Company.

Meanwhile, a Marine came up from Cooley’s position looking for Lieutenant Ruffer: “Where’s the Lieutenant? Where’s the Lieutenant?” When he found Ruffer, the runner gestured and said: “Sgt Cooley says that they’re going that way!”

Once more, the Marines near Cooley were hearing movement to the east, which meant the NVA were trying to encircle the Marines again and cut off the trail back to the battalion.

Even though he was wounded, Ruffer began searching for men to make another charge. “Is there any man here who is ambulatory?” he asked. “Can anybody hold a rifle?”

Many rifles were useless. Their owners had run out of ammunition. The men would have to fight with whatever they had. Ken Chambers, the fireteam leader Ruffer promoted after he threw the Vietnamese RF off the bridge at Dien Ban, brandished a machete. Chambers had distributed the last of his ammunition to his men. Another man had an entrenching tool. Others stood ready with knives. Ruffer tried to redistribute ammunition. Some fireteams were completely out. The Marine machine guns were silent: most of the gunners were wounded or had run out of ammunition.

Ruffer thought briefly about giving the command “Fix bayonets.” He decided against it because that would have alerted any NVA who spoke English that the Marines were out of ammunition.

Ruffer decided to attack once more down the trail at Third Platoon’s weak right flank. The enemy was down there, still in strength, and moving forward. If he took his men straight through the vegetation at Cooley’s position, he would lose contact with them almost instantly. The trail was still the best option for taking the

attack to the enemy.

When it appeared that there was to be yet another counterattack, Zorn crawled to a dead Marine near his position, took the man's M16 and ammo, then crawled back to his original location. He took his KA-Bar knife from its sheath and planted it in front of his right hand when the ammo ran out, they would have to fight hand-to-hand. At Ruffer's signal, Zorn and Coss got up to charge the North Vietnamese. They took only a couple of steps forward. An NVA soldier stepped out from behind a tree and shot the Marine to Zorn's left with an AK47 on full automatic. The communist was not more than five feet away. Zorn blasted the NVA with his M16, crawled over to the wounded Marine and yelled for a corpsman. He then fell back to his position and continued firing at the enemy.

"There were dead and wounded Marines all around our position and dead NVA in front of me and in our perimeter," Zorn says. "I had been on a lot of patrols, battles, and operations but I was never so scared and saw such death and destruction at such an immense level as this night."

Ruffer continued to execute his charge. "At this point, there may not have been more than six Marines that I could see," Ruffer says. "The bad guys were shooting greenish-white tracers and that was about the only way I could tell who was who. We didn't want to hit our own people, and we didn't want to waste ammo." Ruffer admonished the men who still had bullets: "Save your ammo. Shoot only when they're in your sights."

Meanwhile, from his vantage point in the broken perimeter, Scott Thorne saw some NVA approaching about 20 feet away. They marched straight through the gap in the lines, walking toward his position. Thorne had no ammunition, no grenades, no weapon to fight with. The worst he could have done to an enemy soldier was hit him in the head with a canteen. The North Vietnamese would surely kill him once they saw he was alive. Thorne pulled the body of a dead Marine over him to shield himself. Suddenly, Americans came screaming through the jungle into the gaps, driving off the enemy. It was the third counterattack launched by Jack Ruffer.

"It was the most spectacular thing I had ever seen in my life," Thorne says. "It was John Wayne. It's like it was scripted or something. Our guys just went from one side to the other, and life looked good."

Armed with little more than fierce courage and determination, the Marines advanced again down the trail. They found the enemy almost immediately. Chambers killed a man with his machete. Another NVA soldier fell to a Marine entrenching tool. Ruffer thought, *How much worse can it get? We are out of ammo and down to E-tools. This can't go on much longer.*

The end was almost near. As he advanced, Ruffer picked up rocks, yelled "GRENADE!" and threw the stones into the jungle, trying to force the enemy back.

As he ran down the trail, Ruffer caught movement out of the corner of his eye. It was an NVA soldier. The man wore a light green shirt, black shorts and no helmet. He was armed with an AK47. The soldier startled Ruffer but didn't seem to see the Marine as he approached the Lieutenant at an angle. Ruffer raised his pistol and fired three or four times. The rounds struck the enemy in the chest and he quickly dropped to the ground.

After he killed the NVA soldier, Ruffer advanced fifteen to twenty meters. The enemy soldiers came out of the darkness in quick succession. Ruffer fired at the approaching forms until he was out of bullets. Then another form stepped out of the shadows. Ruffer threw his pistol at the enemy soldier with one hand and stabbed at him with the KA-Bar in his other. He managed to cut the man, but his blow was not lethal. The Lieutenant tried to advance, but tripped over a body or a root and fell. As he lay on his back, he was struck in the right mid-abdomen by a piece of a spent tracer round. The bullet fragment burned a hole in his shirt, penetrated his right mid-abdomen, broke his right lower rib and lodged high in the right side of his chest under his right arm.

Before he could get up, and in the light of a nearby muzzle flash, he saw a dark form hovering above him. An NVA soldier, standing above, pointed the barrel of his AK47 down at him. With one pull of the trigger, Ruffer would be dead. But before the man could fire, Ruffer heard a *swish* and a *thump*. The body fell on top of him. Chambers, still armed with only his machete, had taken out the armed shadow. Ruffer had given Chambers a second chance that day back at the bridge. The Marine returned the favor by saving his Lieutenant's life.

Ruffer pushed the dead NVA off of him. Chambers grabbed his Lieutenant by the belt and the back of his shirt and started dragging

him up the hill. The trip was only 10 to 15 meters, but it seemed to Ruffer to be much longer. As the two men approached the top of the hill, another Marine called out, “Who is it?”

Chambers replied, “It’s the Lieutenant” and grabbed a corpsman.

Ruffer’s back was numb, so he couldn’t lie down. He also couldn’t lie on his stomach because of the bullet wound and fractured rib. He sat on a log and said, “I think I’m all right. I just came damn close.”

The corpsman knelt next to him and asked, “Are you OK?”

“I don’t know. I can’t feel anything,” Ruffer replied.

The Limit

After the third counterattack, Charlie Company had reached its limit. One more determined assault by the enemy would break the Marines. The men simply didn’t have enough ammunition to stem the tide. Armed with a few bullets, knives, machetes, entrenching tools, and courage, the Americans waited for the inevitable enemy onslaught.

The North Vietnamese continued to probe for a weakness in the Marine line. “CHARLIE COMPANY, YOU DIE TONIGHT!” was a constant taunt. Ed Yates, with Second Platoon, carried a small, portable transistor radio. From his vantage point on top of the hill, he could reach Hanoi. Yates tuned into “Hanoi Hannah,” a North Vietnamese propagandist who sought to erode the morale of American servicemen. Over the radio, Hannah taunted: “Charlie Company, First Marines, you die tonight!”

Yates and the other men were bewildered. “We asked each other, ‘How did the NVA in the trees and Hanoi Hannah know who the hell we were?’”

The enemy fire continued. Zorn, unable to fire his rocket launcher in such close combat, destroyed the weapon. When his position was overrun, he didn’t want it to fall into enemy hands.

The Marines were tired and thirsty. The men of Second Platoon listened to the battle below. George Hutchings’ mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton. He rummaged through his pack and found a can of peaches. He opened the can and sucked the extra syrup from the can.

“Are those peaches?” whispered Morgan Bice.

“Yeah.” he replied.

Hutchings offered some to Bice, who eagerly ate the moist peaches.

The two men savored what little moisture there was in the canned fruit.

Mark Anderson, who had been on the perimeter with Second Platoon earlier in the night, was now with the command group near the center of the Marine position manning the radio. Medevacs had to be called in for the critically wounded. All of the injured and dead Marines were being brought right to Anderson's location. The wounded were screaming.

I could be next, he thought as he watched the Marines cry out in pain. It was up to Anderson to bring in a medevac to save their lives.

"That was the worst night of my life," he says. "I was at Con Thien, Hue City and Khe Sanh. For me, as far as being scared, nothing compared to this."

Despite Anderson's pleas, the medevacs wouldn't come in. The firefight was simply too intense. "There wouldn't have been a helicopter pilot in his right mind come in there. It was too hot a firefight," Anderson says. "Our perimeter was so small that even if they landed in the dead center of it, they would be easy pickin's."

Anderson knew that men were dying. He knew that there was nothing he could do for them. All he could do was listen. "Nobody called out for their wives or their girlfriends," he remembers. "When they died, they called out for their moms. Then they died. I remember that vividly. You knew they were going to die when they started calling for their mothers."

After the men died, they were covered with their ponchos. A row of five or six dead Marines was already covered, their boots sticking out from underneath. Anderson lay on his stomach, staring at the row of boots. "At the beginning of the evening, they were alive. Towards the end, they weren't. I try not to think about that much."

Even though he was wounded, Jack Ruffer couldn't stay in one spot. He spent some time in the center of the perimeter where the serious casualties were located, checking to see if any of the wounded were from his platoon. He wanted to comfort them. "You did a good job," he told many of the men.

He checked the status of the men on the front line, many of whom were also wounded. He then returned to the center of the perimeter.

Corpsmen pulled ponchos over the heads of the wounded before shining a flashlight. Otherwise, they would give away their position to the enemy. A corpsman examining a Marine under a poncho

called out to Ruffer, “Lieutenant, this one’s yours.”

Ruffer walked over to the downed Marine. He was very young and had suffered a severe head wound. The injury was mortal. As if the man were a child, Ruffer took the Marine in his arms and began to rock him back and forth. The young man was murmuring and appeared to be in pain. Ruffer rocked him and said, “You’re going to be all right. You’re going to be all right. Hang on. Hang on.”

“Quit wasting your time,” the corpsman said. “If you’re going to help, help with someone who is going to live.” The corpsman moved on to a Marine who had sustained less critical injuries.

Ruffer resented that remark, even though he knew the corpsman was probably right. But Ruffer continued to rock the wounded Marine. As his life was ebbing away, the dying Marine muttered, “Momma…. momma…”

PFC William “Stan” Blessing, eighteen years of age, from Denver, Colorado, died in Jack Ruffer’s arms. He had been in country less than three weeks.

The Lieutenant continued to rock Blessing and, when he became quiet, gently laid him down.

A Lonely Trail

Ruffer returned to the nearby command post to give Major an update on his platoon’s condition.

“Jack, you’re not going to like me for this one,” Major said. “Delta Company is on its way. They’re up the trail that you were on this afternoon.”

“How far?” Ruffer asked.

“They think they are about 100 yards away. They want us to lead them in. Have you got anybody?”

The two men paused. Even though Second Platoon held the high ground above the trail, the area was bound to be filled with North Vietnamese. It would be dangerous for any Marine to go down that path. If the NVA didn’t get the Marine scout, Delta Company surely would. They could easily mistake him for the enemy.

Ruffer thought, *To hell with finding anybody.*

“I’ll take care of it,” he said.

The intrepid Lieutenant grabbed a .45 pistol lying nearby, shoved it into his holster, and took off down the trail where the initial ambush had taken place. He went slowly at first, walking and crouching for

the first 30 or 40 meters. Then he started to run. The longer he ran, the more surprised he was that no Marine or NVA took a shot at him. Instead, his worst enemies were the trees: In the pitch darkness, the injured officer kept running into branches and stumbling over roots. But he kept running, his wounds numb.

Although he didn't say it, the skipper was sure that he would never see the Lieutenant alive again.

Dirty Delta

When Charlie Company was attacked, Delta was put on high alert. When the order was given, they would rush to the aid of their fellow Marines. But the order wasn't given and they waited. Charlie Company was in a trap that was closing fast. If Delta was sent in hastily, they might also be overrun. Coming down that trail, in the black forest, Delta would be a prime target for another NVA ambush. The enemy knew the path they had to take and the Delta Marines would be spread out along the trail as they moved in.

"We would be more vulnerable than if we had been in a defensive perimeter," Griffin says. "At least Charlie Company had a defensive perimeter. We were hoping that Charlie Company could handle what they were into, but we were certainly willing to go to their aid if they needed us. We would expect the same from them if we were in that situation. That's when adrenaline starts and Semper Fidelis kicks in. They would do the same for us because they were our fellow Marines."

The men of Delta could hear the battle in the jungle ahead of them. LCpl Karl E. Bockman, an M60 machine gunner with Delta Company, could hear the survivors of Charlie Company crying out, "Where's Delta? Where is Dirty Delta?"

Finally the order came over the radio.

"SADDLE UP!" yelled Lieutenant Steve Lampo, commander of First Platoon. Delta Company was heading in.

Griffin had a great deal of respect for his Lieutenant. A former football player for the University of Missouri, Lampo had been wounded on Operation Swift. Griffin became his radioman upon the Lieutenant's return from the hospital. "Lampo was gung ho, straight out of the movies," he says. "I can remember when he got shot in the foot at Con Thien. He did a double summersault in the air, landed on his feet, and he yelled at me to get out of my foxhole. This guy was

unbelievable. He was a Marine's Marine. He exhibited no fear, he never let his troops show fear and he always led from the front."

Lampo ordered his men to put out flank security. These men were given the job of protecting the exposed flanks of the main column. The hope was that they would surprise any enemy force that was setting up for a possible ambush. Then the men started forward in the darkness on the muddy, slippery trail. They moved toward the sounds of battle, trying to be as quiet as possible.

A fireteam of four Marines led the column, followed by Lampo and Griffin. Captain Gallagher, commander of Delta Company, was behind Griffin in the lead platoon. These men were at the point of Delta Company. If the men were to be ambushed, the point squad would take the brunt of the attack.

"We were a seasoned group so we could move with some stealth," Griffin says. "It was a scary and difficult situation. I thought that we would be ambushed any second. I prayed for God to help me get through this one. I asked for His help and also to give me courage so that I could do my job."

Griffin's job was to focus on radio communication. He had to do so quietly. This was accomplished by "keying" the radio's handset when battalion or Charlie Company needed to know their progress.

They walked for 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes. It seemed like it was taking a lifetime to reach their desperate comrades.

Gallagher was proceeding cautiously. He knew that the NVA would use the terrain to their advantage. He also knew that once American forces had some knowledge of the terrain, the NVA were less likely to get the upper hand. If that happened, the North Vietnamese would often disappear. Gallagher hoped that this would be the case.

As the men got closer, they thought they could hear Charlie Company Marines call out to them. Ronald Pelkey, Delta Company gunnery sergeant, heard voices out in the brush:

"Delta Company!" they said.

Pelkey was an experienced gunny. He wasn't easily fooled. He and his men ignored the voices. More than likely, they were NVA.

When they reached a small area that was less dense than the surrounding jungle, Griffin heard someone yelling for Delta Company. The men tensed, on alert, their fingers on the triggers of their rifles.

The man yelled, "Hold your fire! Delta Company hold your fire! It's

Charlie Company."

This time, it wasn't an NVA soldier. It was Jack Ruffer. The Lieutenant appeared out of the darkness and moved past the point squad to Captain Gallagher.

"We need to move quickly," Ruffer told Gallagher. "I don't know how many NVA are on the back side, but if we move fast enough, we might be safe. Follow me and let's get going."

Ruffer led Delta in. It took about 10 minutes to reach the battle zone. Delta had been further away than they thought. "We had been hearing all along that Delta Company was trying to come to our support, but they had to fight through the jungle," Zorn says. "It seemed like forever. Suddenly, I heard screaming from behind me: 'COME ON CHARLIE COMPANY… COME ON!' It gave us all a shot of adrenaline."

When they reached the battlefield, Captain Gallagher immediately called, "GUNS UP!"

Machine gunner Bockman was back in the line of Delta Marines, listening to the agonized cries of Charlie Company, thinking about Clint Eastwood in *Fist Full of Dollars*. Then, he heard the call for "Guns up!"

"MAKE WAY FOR A GUN!" he cried out as he moved forward on the edge of the column. He quickly arrived at the front. Ruffer led Bockman and his team up to a large log and pointed out the location of the Charlie Company perimeter.

"As I looked into the gloom, small arms and automatic weapons fire were pouring out of the trees. The night smelled of nitrates and body stench," Bockman later wrote in his journal. "The officer wanted me to send my gun out into what should be the center and lay down a base of fire – in all directions – so that Delta could fill in the holes in their lines. I had to keep my M60's gun barrel elevated so as not to hit his men or the Delta Company replacements."

Bockman couldn't see the Charlie Company men: "They were so deep in cover we didn't know where they were." He had to get his M60 firing, but he had a problem. One of his men had disappeared and another refused to move. Only one member of his team would accompany Bockman as he started out from behind the log and moved forward. As the two men quickly stepped over bodies and rubble, Bockman searched the trees in front of him. He tried to identify where the Marines were and where the enemy was from the

location of their muzzle flashes. Arriving at what he thought was the center, Bockman "opened up" with his machine gun and a 100 round belt of all tracer ammunition. "This was the first time I ever fired from the hip with an M60, and it was quite an experience. It was like I was unaware of what I was doing but moved by instinct and training rather than thought. It was very fluid and sweeping."

Then, when he needed to reload, he looked at his ammo carrier, a rookie on his team named Hoffman. "I looked into Hoffie's wide eyes. He just nodded and pitched up the other men's boxes of ammo. You'd never know we weren't two old salts."

As he fired round after round, Bockman focused on the greenish-white tracer flashes of the enemy. He heard cheers from the men of Charlie Company. His machine gun continued to hammer away into the jungle, so much so that the gas cylinder inside the weapon went "white" hot. After nearly 500 rounds, the gun jammed and couldn't be repaired in the field, but not before most of the ammunition was used up. Bockman and his men then turned to their M16's. Bockman himself fired four to six magazines of M16 ammunition (twenty rounds each) into the enemy.

Then, Bockman and his team moved to the east side of the Charlie Company perimeter which was quickly expanding as Delta poured in to fill gaps in Charlie Company's line. Bockman estimates that his team killed six NVA, all of whom were well armed with AK47's, grenades, and an RPG.

Ruffer helped place the Delta Company men in those spots along the line where Charlie Company was most vulnerable. The incoming NVA fire was heavy, and time was pressing. As the Delta Company Marines poured into the LZ, the men of Charlie Company who were able, stood up and joined the charge. "I had an M16 with my last magazine," Zorn says. "Guys to the left and right of me charged with machetes and e-tools. We ran 50 to 100 feet forward. We set up new fighting positions further down the slope in the front and we pushed the enemy back."

"When we got there, there were dead and wounded laying all over the place," Gunny Pelkey of Delta Company says. "They were low on ammunition. They were practically down to their last round. They were in bad shape. We instructed our company troops to share their ammunition with what remained of Charlie Company."

Before Delta Company came in, word had been passed to Second

Platoon, which held the ground overlooking where the trail intersected the LZ, that reinforcements were on their way. “We didn’t know when Delta would arrive,” said Ed Yates. “We needed help. Even the lowest private could see that we were in trouble.” As he waited, Yates hoped that his ammunition would hold out. It was still pitch dark. Every bush looked like the enemy. He heard insects, screams, rounds flying, explosions, and static from his radio. He did little talking. Finally, a bush moved. He tensed. A voice cried out, “Yates, don’t shoot!”

Yates couldn’t see anything. “What?” he shouted back.

“Don’t shoot. It’s Payne!”

“Payne?”

“Yeah, from boot camp. Payne!”

Yates knew the Delta Company man back at Parris Island. When men from Delta arrived near Morgan Bice and George Hutchings, there was a tense moment. The North Vietnamese would often imitate American voices. Delta and Charlie Marines alike had to be sure they weren’t being tricked by an English speaking enemy. Finally, a Delta Company man asked, “Who won the World Series?”

Bice and Hutchings looked at each other and shrugged. They hadn’t been listening to the radio or reading any newspapers. A Marine next to them shouted back, “The St. Louis Cardinals.” Hutchings was glad someone in his squad had been keeping up with the news.

Ruffer showed Lampo and Gallagher where Charlie’s men were placed. Delta Company Marines filled the gaps and reinforced the perimeter.

“When Delta came through the draw, you could hear the Marines coming and you could hear Lieutenant Ruffer yelling not to fire,” George Boze says. “There was a great sigh of relief that Delta had gotten there in time because we were down to our last rounds.”

Ruffer returned to the command post. Major was amazed to see him. There had been a great chance that Ruffer would be shot by Second Platoon, Delta Company, or the NVA.

“Skipper, I’ve made contact with Delta,” Ruffer reported. “I have them tied in to our rear.”

“Good job,” Major replied. “Thank you very much. You need to get back to your platoon.”

Delta quickly distributed ammunition to the Charlie Company Marines. “There was no time for small talk,” Boze says. “They were

giving us loaded magazines. The wounded who were able to load magazines in the bomb crater passed them to the rest of us who were firing. We didn't have time to sit there and put stripper clips in and start jamming ammunition into the magazines. The fighting was too intense."

To fill out the perimeter and tie in with Delta, Bice, Hutchings, and a few others climbed up a steep hill. In the pitch darkness, they couldn't see and ran into practically every root and tree they encountered. Finally, they reached the top and dug in. They weren't taking fire, but a brief, intense firefight raged below, between the Delta arrivals and the remaining NVA.

The men quickly dug in. As Hutchings watched the machine guns blasting, the tracer rounds rising into the air, and the grenades exploding, all he could think of was that he was in hell.

But Delta Company's arrival turned the tables on the NVA. "The firepower coming out toward them (the NVA) was almost quadrupled," Boze says. "We were chucking grenades that we got from Delta as fast as we could pull the pins. It now became an almost constant hammering that we were giving them from 360 degrees around."

"It was better than winning a million dollars," says Mike Robinson, who watched as Delta Company filled in the lines. "Here was a bunch of Marines who thought that this was going to be their last day on earth, and Delta broke through and got to us. We were hugging each other. It was like heaven. We hugged the Delta Marines. It was hard to explain how we felt. We knew we might make it."

The firefight slowed down and after about 15 minutes broke off entirely.

"Because they realized a force superior to theirs was mounting a counterattack in their area, they took off," Captain Gallagher says.

Once the area was secured, the seriously wounded were carried to a central location where Charlie and Delta Company corpsmen were now tending to all the casualties. Those who could walk were put in a safe area near the LZ until they could be medevaced out.

Dennis Antal saw some men from Delta approach. "We tried to get here. We tried to get here all night," a Delta Marine shouted. The new arrivals had to yell at Antal. His hearing had been damaged by the grenade blast. One of the men gave Antal his canteen. The water was warm and sour, probably river water. He drank it down eagerly

and asked for more.

The Delta Marines tried to pick Antal up, but he told them that he could walk a little. So one Marine walked on each side of him, helping him up the trail to the landing zone. As they walked, one of the Delta Marines tripped on a body.

Antal tried to look back to see if the body was American or NVA, but the Delta Marines wouldn't let him. They just hurried him toward the LZ.

Without stopping, Antal was taken to that section of the landing zone where the wounded and dead were located. Antal sat down next to his friend, Mike Cole.

David Welsh had not moved since he collapsed. His wounded leg lay on top of the log he had been trying to climb over. The rest of his body was behind it. Weak from massive blood loss, consciousness came and went. He heard Delta Company coming, yelling out for Charlie Company survivors in the dense foliage.

Welsh heard a voice say, "We're going to take care of you." He looked up and saw the sweat-covered face of a Delta Marine. Another American said, "I'm sorry it took so long. I'm sorry we didn't get here sooner. They wouldn't let us come."

"They were so sincere, and you would have thought that I was their dearest brother just by the way that they treated me for a few seconds before they had to do what they had to do," Welsh says.

"I'll take care of you," a corpsman said as he applied a battle dressing to Welsh's leg and head. The bleeding had to be stopped quickly. "You've lost a lot of blood," the corpsman said. He gave Welsh a unit of plasma, and then Welsh was moved to the center of the perimeter with the other wounded.

Phil Seymour, weary from four hours of fighting, climbed back to the LZ. He dropped his rifle, his cartridge belt, and his helmet, then sank to the ground, all his energy expended. As he watched the men of Delta assist Charlie, he thought that if Delta had been delayed even 10 minutes, they may not have found anyone left alive.

When the North Vietnamese backed off, the men relaxed a little. "Then we had time for chit chat, pat the Delta guy on the back or slap him on his cheek and thank him for saving our miserable lives," Boze says. "If it hadn't been for Delta Company and our officers, we were dead. That is a fact."

The increased fire from the American perimeter wasn't the only

factor in the NVA decision to back off. If the NVA fired again, they would expose their position to Puff, the gunship.

When the NVA first attacked, Puff would have been useless. The enemy soldiers were too close to call in supporting arms. Marine and NVA alike would be mowed down by the dragon's breath. But as a result of the counterattacks and the arrival of Delta Company, the enemy had backed off. Major, in yet another tactical decision of the chaotic night, decided that the time was right to call in Puff. The lethal gunship would keep the North Vietnamese off their backs. He had learned his lesson from the previous waves of NVA attacks. "Just because they had broken contact doesn't mean that they weren't going to re-organize and attack us again."

Puff began to circle overhead shortly after Delta Company arrived. It was now about midnight. Puff's companion gunship that night was a Lockheed AC-130 known as Spooky. Spooky was similarly equipped with mini-guns and would rotate duty with Puff. "God bless Spook'," said one Marine. "God bless Puff," said another.

Ruffer heard a gunship circling overhead. The enemy was silent. "The NVA were smart enough to know that if there is a slow moving gunship above them, it was best not to attract any attention," he says. He was relieved. He thought, *Well, maybe we will make it. Maybe there is life after this.*

The gunships gave the other Marines hope as well. "It was a great feeling when they showed up," Robinson says. "We were happier than hell. We didn't cheer, but sometimes we high-fived each other if we could without getting our head shot off."

Puff began to drop flares in order to give the men on the ground some light to see by. "When you are in the jungle like that, it doesn't help very much," Griffin says. "We had a fear that we might get hit with one of the flare canisters."

Major watched as flares were dropped in areas where the enemy could be hiding. Finally, when Puff acquired a target, it began to fire. The guns roared like chainsaws. Flames of red tracers spewed like fire. The aircraft resembled some ferocious, mystical flying beast.

"The sound of Puff's gatling guns was amazing," Griffin says. "It was a loud, staccato-type sound. Thousands of red tracers came out of this plane into the jungle. I thanked God that Puff was there. He kept the enemy from regrouping in mass and setting up for another attack."

Under normal conditions, members of the TACP on the ground would communicate with Puff the location of the enemy and of the Marines. However, several of the TACP members were seriously wounded. Ruffer located a collared strobe light that the TACP used to communicate with Puff. The collar prevented the high-intensity light signals from being seen from the ground as they were aimed up at the gunships. Ruffer lay on his back and directed the strobe light at the gunship overhead to let them know where the Marines were.

The effect was devastating. “Puff and Spooky can put one round in every square foot of a football field in about sixty seconds,” Ruffer says. “That kept the NVA off of us the rest of the night.”

Mark Anderson was on the radio. “I spent my time talking to the Puff pilot and trying to get medevacs in. I was simply maintaining an open channel. If an officer needed to talk to Puff, he would just take the handset from me and talk. People would come out of the dark, grab the handset and talk, then go back into the darkness.”

When Puff and Spooky withdrew, Major called in artillery illumination so his Marines and those of Delta Company could continue to consolidate their defensive positions. “It was a very weird feeling after the battle for everything to be so still and quiet,” he says. “The illumination rounds would pop out. The shells would go whistling overhead. It was strange to hear these rounds whistle overhead and crash into the timber about two hundred yards in the distance.”

One of the areas where the gunships dropped illumination rounds was Regimental Objective 5, the hillside position far in the distance that the Marines had been trying to reach. For a while, Major thought he was going to be ordered to take that objective.

Many of the Charlie Company casualties were in critical condition. They needed to be evacuated immediately. Corpsmen didn’t have enough water to irrigate the wounds of the casualties. All Unit One’s had been depleted of bandages. Getting the choppers to the LZ was now a top priority. Some Marines with minor wounds were still guarding the perimeter, waiting until the situation was stable before being treated.

Griffin made his way to the LZ to see what he could do to help. He was amazed at what he saw. “This little knoll, which was once covered with trees, was now flat land with 782 gear, rifles and bodies lying all around,” Griffin says. The smoky battleground was filled

with the screams of the wounded. Healthy men tended to their injured brothers, offering assistance and encouragement where they could. The men of Delta were in awe at the number of casualties strewn across the LZ. In Ruffer's First Platoon, which had been spared in the initial ambush, 34 of 40 men were wounded including Ruffer himself, and two men, Bazulto and Blessing – were dead.

Third Platoon, which had seen a man killed in the initial ambush, saw almost 30 wounded that day and had four men killed in the second round of fighting. Among the fallen was Gerald Brothers. His wife of two months was already a widow. John Castillo was also dead, as well as 21-year-old PFC James De Abre from Morgan Hill, California and 19-year-old John Lee from Creswell, Oregon.

Roger Walton of the weapons platoon and combat photographer William Perkins were also among the fallen.

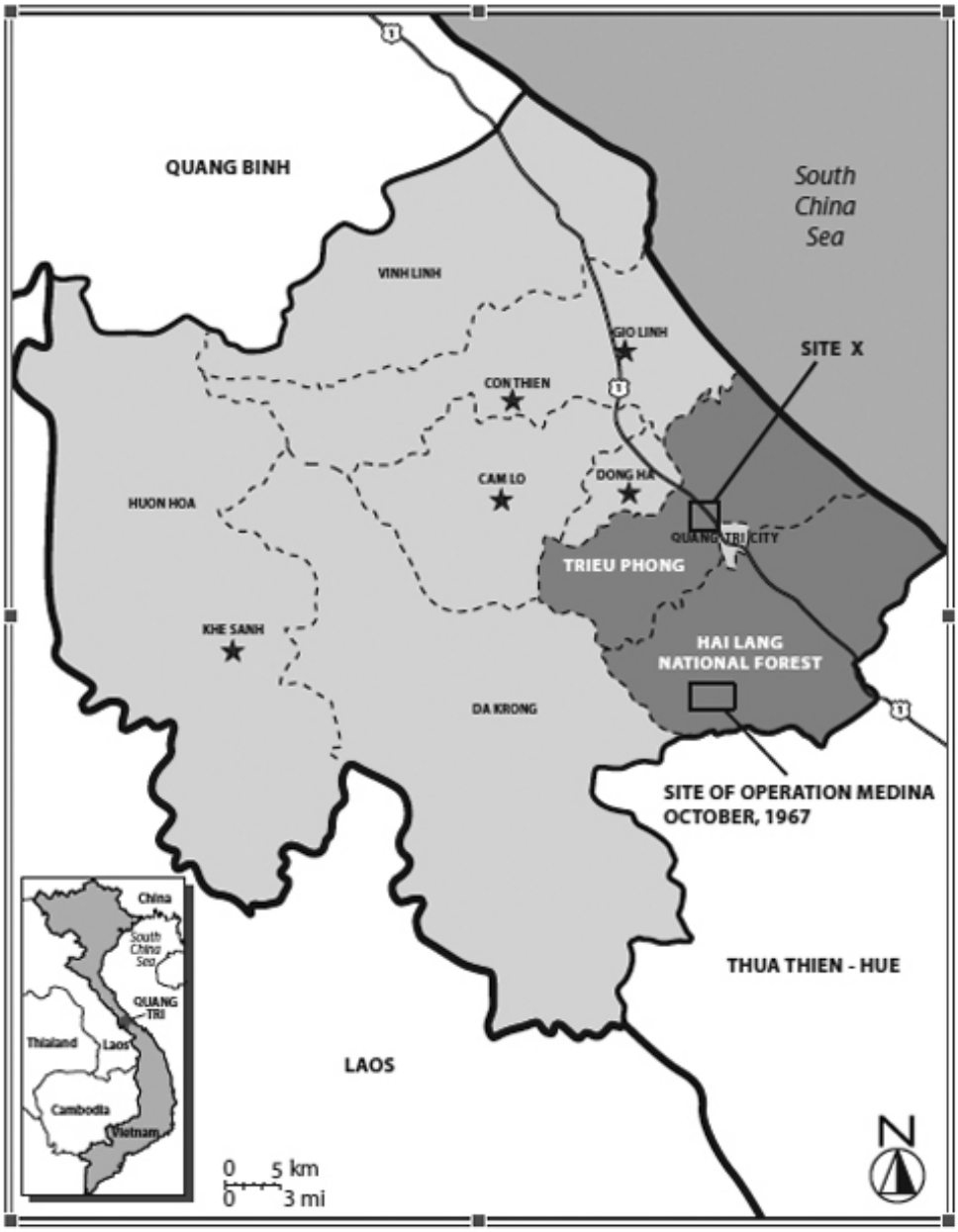
Around 4 a.m., some medevac choppers flew in, but the situation was still perilous. Even with the gunships on watch, there were still occasional outbursts of enemy fire. The helicopters were sitting ducks as they hovered over the landing zone and lowered their litters. Ronald Pelkey of Delta Company surveyed the LZ, which wasn't safe enough for the medevac choppers. He had some demolitions flown in and blew a landing site in the jungle with the help of two engineers. One chopper lowered a chainsaw to help clear the littered LZ to make it easier for medevacs to land.

The helicopters had no room to maneuver. Some lowered litters down for the wounded men while others landed on the perilous jungle floor. As one chopper descended, the tail rotor chopped off the antennae of Anderson's radio. Anderson dove to the ground.

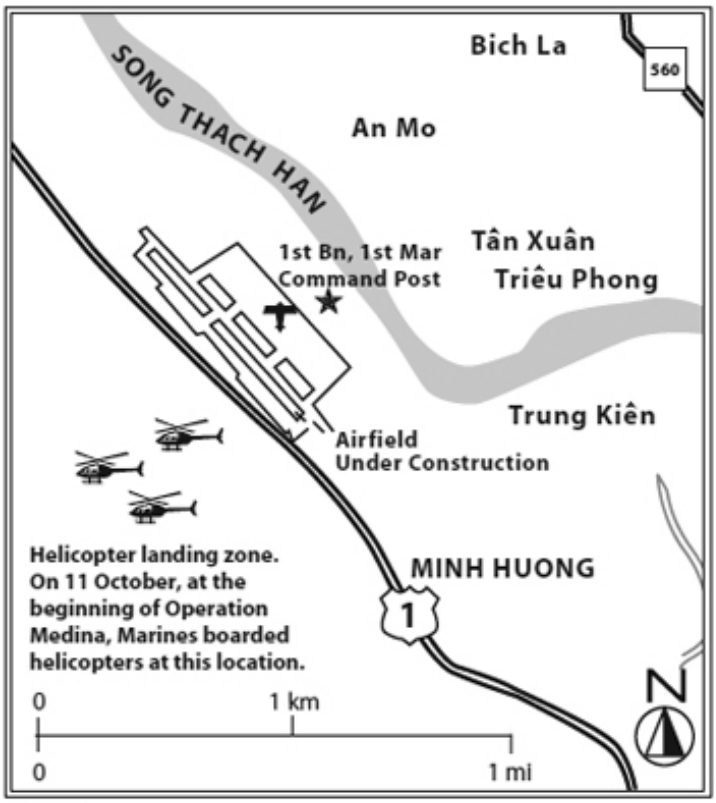
Several wounded Marines were safely evacuated, but many more had to wait. The corpsmen worked feverishly all night to keep men alive until they could get on that chopper. "The corpsmen were doing things that doctors did," Hartranft says. "They were a great bunch of guys. I can't say enough. The corpsmen performed miracles, especially with head wounds and stomach wounds."

Despite his injuries, Ruffer continued to keep busy. He checked on SSgt Cooley, who had been wounded twice, and checked the lines again.

Then slowly, inevitably, it began to get light.



The Districts of Quang Tri Province, Republic of South Vietnam, 1967.



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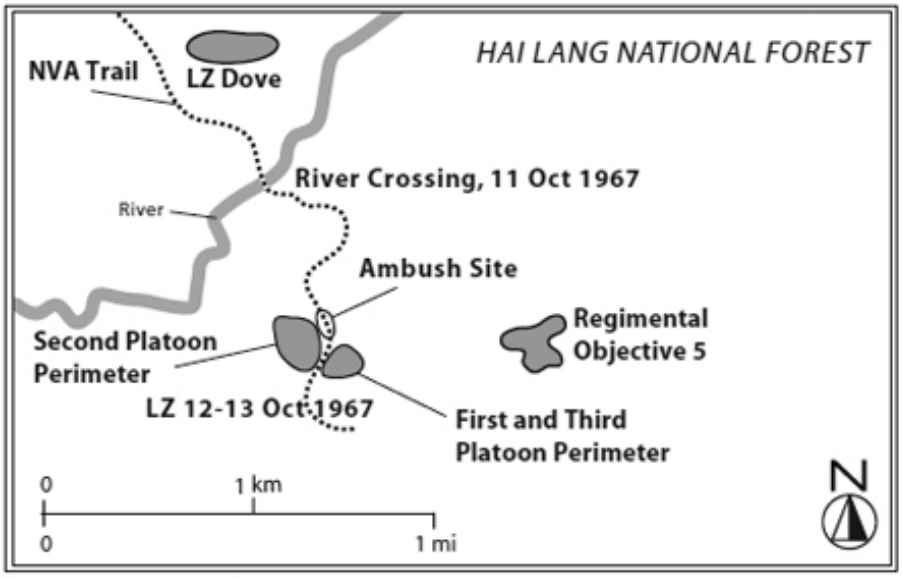


Operation Medina, Charlie Company 1/1, October 1967, Hai Lang National Forest.

OPERATION MEDINA: 11 OCTOBER 1967

LCpl George Boze (first from left) disembarks helicopter onto LZ Dove at the beginning of Operation Medina, 11 October. Boze is carrying an M16 and a LAAW. *Photo credit: U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM – Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967 – Telfer, Rogers and Fleming – History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington D.C. 1984.*

Marines shortly after insertion into LZ Dove at the beginning of Operation Medina on 11 October. First Lieutenant Paul Nelson (fourth from left, without helmet) organizes Third Platoon prior to leading them off the LZ into the triple canopy jungle. Sgt Phil Seymour is second from left, with bare arm. Marine in foreground has a gas mask on his hip. Many of the gas masks were ruined during the river crossing later that day. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Marines shortly after insertion into LZ Dove at the beginning of Operation Medina on 11 October. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Charlie Company Marines cross a mountain river with the aid of a rope as they make their way toward the first battalion objective on 11 October. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

OPERATION MEDINA: 12 OCTOBER 1967 (PRIOR TO AMBUSH)

Marines walking past a bomb crater on Operation Medina, 12 October. The Marine in the foreground is carrying two LAAWs and an M16. The next Marine carries three LAAWs and an M16. The far Marine carries an M16 and two belts of M60 machine gun ammunition. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Marines take a break near the edge of a bomb crater on the early afternoon of 12 October before moving out toward Regimental Objective 5, the first regimental objective in their zone of action. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Marines walking past a bomb crater on Operation Medina, 12 October. The second man in the foreground appears to be a Navy corpsman carrying a Unit One. Captain Major can be seen in the rear with his back to camera, without helmet, fourth from left. Photo taken during a short break in the early afternoon after the first battalion objective was reached. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Marines in Sgt Phil Seymour's mortar section. Marine on the right, PFC Bill Ewing, is cleaning the mortar tube. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Marines head down hill into the jungle toward Regimental Objective 5. Marine first from left is armed with an M16. Marine second from left rests a 3.5-inch rocket for a M20A1B1 rocket launcher on his shoulder and carries an M16. A LAAW can be seen on the back of the man third from right. He is also armed with an M16. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

A well armed Marine emerges from the dense jungle. Note bandoliers of M16 ammunition across his chest. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Marine with M60 machine gun traversing the tough jungle terrain on the afternoon of 12 October. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

OPERATION MEDINA: AFTER AMBUSH ON 12 OCTOBER 1967

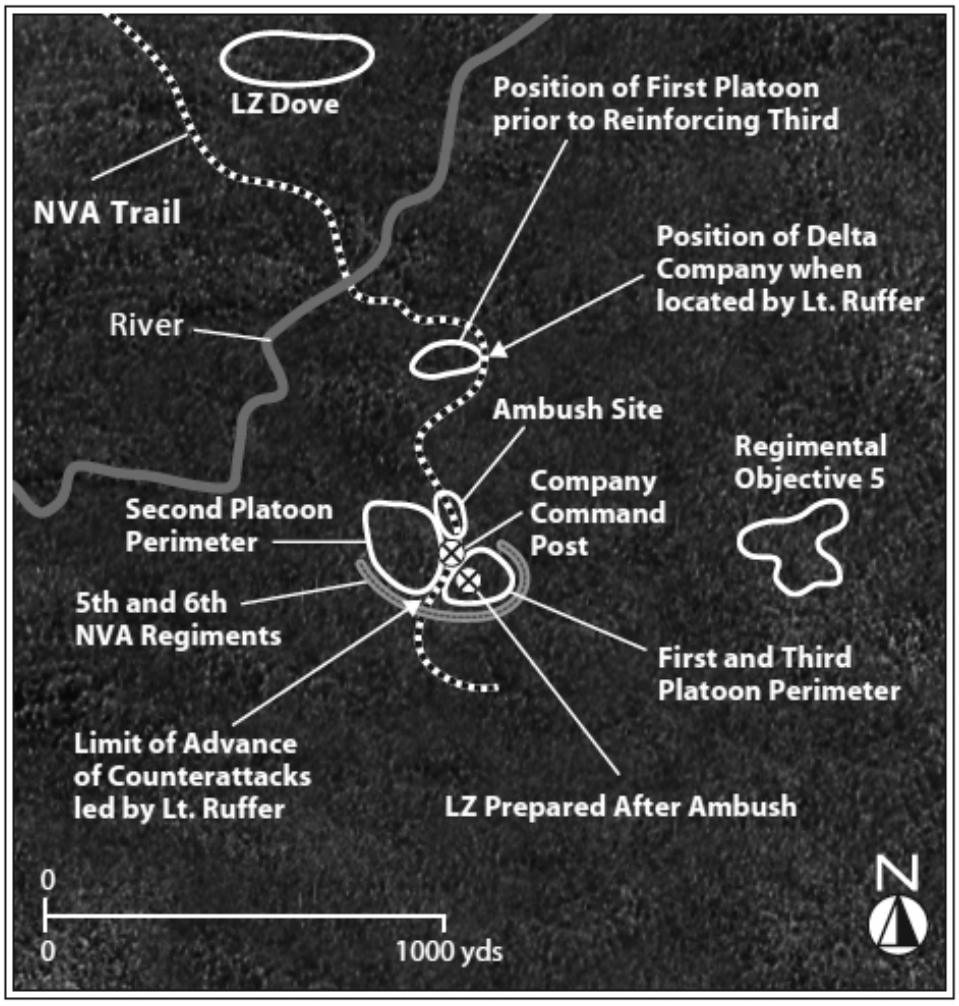
Marines clearing trees for a landing zone (LZ) after the initial ambush on 12 October. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Marine places explosives on a tree in preparation for blowing a landing zone (LZ) after the initial ambush on 12 October. *Photo credit: U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM - Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967 - Telfer, Rogers and Fleming - History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps, Washington D.C. 1984.*

Marines police the perimeter as a UH-34 helicopter arrives to evacuate casualties after the ambush on 12 October. Note tree trunk in background that blocks the LZ. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Cpl William T. Perkins, Jr. (standing, second from left) films the evacuation of wounded Marines after the initial ambush on 12 October. LCpl George Boze is standing left of Perkins. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

UH-34 helicopter evacuates a Marine wounded during the initial ambush on the afternoon of 12 October. The Marine is being hoisted in a Stokes litter. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*



Operation Medina, Charlie Company, 11-12, and Early Morning 13 October 1967, Hai Lang National Forest, Republic of South Vietnam.

OPERATION MEDINA: 13 OCTOBER 1967

Light on the morning of 13 October shines on Marines as they watch the perimeter for enemy movement. PFC Stephen Kane (first from left) still wears the rain jacket he wore during the battle the night before. The second Marine is a squad leader. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Medina battlefield on the morning of 13 October. Photo taken below the LZ looking up. The barrel of an M60 machine gun can be seen in the left foreground. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Medina battlefield on 13 October. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Medina battlefield on 13 October. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Marine getting some rest, late morning on 13 October. The Marine's helmet is to his right, his utility jacket, M60 machine gun and pack are to his left. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

On the edge of the Medina battlefield, 13 October. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

LCpl Robert "Sanitary Bob" Headrick with captured NVA flag on the morning of 13 October. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Marines duck the tail rotor of a UH-34 helicopter on 13 October. During the night battle on 12 October, LCpl Boze, Doc Hammergren and PFC Walton were located in the crater at the bottom of the photograph. Cpl John Lee was killed in the area to the right of the chopper's tail. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

From left to right: PFC Stephen M. Kane, Lieutenant Colonel Albert F. Belbusti and Captain William D. Major on the morning of 13 October. Captain Major gives Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti his assessment of the overnight battle that occurred on 12 October and in the early morning hours of 13 October. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

Wounded and exhausted, First Lieutenant Jack A. Ruffer (far right) waits for a medevac as Marines police the Medina battlefield on the morning of 13 October. The trail down which First Lieutenant Ruffer led three counterattacks is over his right shoulder. *Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines. Photograph by SSgt Bruce A. Martin, Leatherneck Magazine.*

View of the trail on 13 October looking toward the ambush site of the day before. Note bullet holes in trees. The trail down which First Lieutenant Ruffer led three counterattacks is behind the photographer approximately 100 meters. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Major A. Michael Leahy (left) and Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Marines carry the body of a dead comrade toward a helicopter for evacuation. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Dead Marines being loaded onto UH-34 helicopter on 13 October. The night before, LCpl George Boze found Cpl John Lee's body in the location where the chopper's left wheel rests. LCpl Boze's position that night is where this photo was taken. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

LCpl Dan Snell (right, with hand on hip) and fellow Marine flanked by a dead NVA soldier on the left and a dead comrade (wrapped in poncho) on the right, 13 October. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Gunnery Sergeant Thomas Thompson (second from left), Captain Major (third from left), LCpl Michael E. Lavallee (fourth from left) and LCpl George Boze (far right) on 13 October. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Another view of the trail where First Lieutenant Ruffer led three counterattacks the night before. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Captain Bill Major with the command group, 13 October. *Original artwork courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Captain James Gallagher (third from left), commander of Delta Company, 13 October. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Marine in the left foreground cleans a 60mm mortar tube with a cleaning rod and a C-Ration can inside a wet sock on 13 October. A second Marine (in the background, towards the middle) tends to another mortar tube. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Cpl Edward R. Yates (left) and Navy Corpsman Kermit Hammergren (center) eat C-Rations while Second Lieutenant Robert A. Anderson (right) cleans his M16 rifle on 13 October. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

LCpl Joseph J. Zorn (top left) and LCpl Ronald L. Coss (center) eat C-Rations on Operation Medina. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Marines dig fighting holes during the late afternoon of 13 October as they prepare a night defense. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Marines pick up supplies at the Battalion CP before moving back to Charlie Company's position on 14 October. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Radioman (first from left) and other Marines prepare to move out on 14 October. *Photo courtesy of Major A. Michael Leahy.*

Snipers Rod Lewis (second from left) and R.J. Jackson (third from left) peer into the dense jungle. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Radio operators on the morning of 14 October. The operator on the right is writing on a message pad. His equipment, which can be seen in the right foreground, consists of his radio on a pack, smoke grenade, M16 rifle, helmet, two canteens, a long antenna in a case and an entrenching tool in a case. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

PFC Stephen Kane (left in background) and Replacement FO in Training Andrukowski (right foreground), on the trail, 14 October. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Elements of Charlie Company move out on 14 October. This is the site where the ambush took place on 12 October. On the 12th, Marines were coming up this NVA trail when they were hit. Now, on the 14th, they are headed down the same trail to tie in with Delta Company. Marine in the foreground is carrying a sock filled with C-Ration cans on his back. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

Charlie Company on the move through the triple canopy jungle on 14 October. *Photo courtesy of A. Michael Leahy.*

AFTER MEDINA

LCpl Mike Robinson on the plane home from Vietnam. P*hoto courtesy of Mike Robinson.*

Second Lieutenant Robert A. Anderson receives the Purple Heart after being wounded during the battle for Hue City in 1968. *Photo courtesy of Robert A. Anderson.*

Captain Ruffer receives the Silver Star from the Commandant of the Marine Corps on 10 January 1968 for gallantry in action during Operation Medina. *Photo courtesy of Jack Ruffer.*

LCpl Dan Snell is awarded the Purple Heart for wounds received on Operation Medina. *Photo courtesy of Dan Snell.*

Medina battlefield, morning, 13 October 1967.

13 October 1967

Dawn arrives slowly in the jungle. Almost like a fog, the light slowly seeps in. There is no stark sun rising on the horizon. Instead, there is a subtle awakening of morning. That light was a welcome old friend to the men of Charlie Company.

"I was never so glad in my life to see the sun come up," Jack Ruffer says. "This was enough light to recognize the person near you and to get a better lay of the land. It was comforting to be able to see rather than having to feel your way around."

The men could finally get a better view of their surroundings. The trees around the LZ were splintered and shredded. The decimated battlefield was covered in an early morning haze from the smoke of the firepower discharged through the night. The trail leading up to the LZ was stained red with blood. Ammunition and equipment were scattered across the little knoll. The grass inside the perimeter was burnt and beaten down.

The odor of gunpowder and the stench of urine, blood, viscera and rotting vegetation lingered in the triple-canopy jungle. Most prominent, however, was the pungent smell of death. The heat and humidity accelerated the decomposition process of those who had been killed. Americans or NVA who were alive only hours before quickly took on an ashen, somewhat greenish tint. As gases from the decaying corpses escaped, the bodies reeked of the odor of death.

"It was a still, gut-wrenching smell, especially when you know it's your own guys," Phil Hartranft says.

At first light, Captain Major looked around and immediately saw the bodies of two dead NVA soldiers 15 feet to the front and near the right side of the trail. They had charged up the trail that Ruffer counterattacked down, pierced the Marine perimeter, and were killed. *My God, did they get that close?* Major thought. He was also shocked at how small the Marine perimeter was. It was about half the size of a football field.

The skipper looked for the grenadier who had tried so hard to kill him and who, in return, Major and Gunny Thompson had tried so hard to kill. There was no sign of him. Major saw all the saplings cut to pieces by gunfire, but no soldier and no blood. The man had

vanished.

Near the American front, on the trail, stood a large tree full of bullet holes. “Those holes were high on the tree,” Major says. “They were from us because they were on our side of the perimeter. That indicated to me that we were initially shooting high. I don’t know about later on. At least initially, when they first fired on us, our response was to overcome them with firepower.”

In that large tree was a dead NVA grenadier. He had been shot repeatedly by various Marines who hadn’t realized that he was already dead. His body was in shreds. “We found NVA up in trees with rope around them,” Zorn says. “They had been throwing grenades down on us right where we were. I smelled burnt hair and cordite.”

On the side opposite the command post, on the other side of the knoll, Major noticed that the slope dropped down a lot steeper than he and the other Marines had realized, which meant that even more Marine firepower probably sailed harmlessly over the heads of the enemy soldiers. “This may have been why the battle went as long as it did – because we weren’t familiar with the terrain,” he says. “Although we did find drag marks, bodies and weapons out to our front, I noticed a lot of bullet holes in trees ten to fifteen feet off of the ground.”

As Major continued to inspect the battlefield, he saw more American casualties than he expected, even though he had already been briefed on the number of dead and wounded. “You can talk numbers, but you still aren’t totally prepared when you see the casualties in this one position. It drives it home.”

As he approached Lieutenant Ruffer, Major knew the other man was not up to par. Ruffer looked weary and in pain. Major complimented him on the superb job he had done during the attack. “I really appreciated what you did,” he said.

Ruffer’s first priority that morning was to account for the men of his First Platoon. He looked around and quickly found Sgt Salvador Bazulto. Bazulto was lying at the head of the trail, face down with his head pointing down the path. At first Ruffer saw only a bullet wound in the right hand. But upon rolling Bazulto on his side, Ruffer saw that the front of his utility jacket was dark red. His pallor was gray, and rigor mortis had started to set in. “I didn’t want to see anymore than that,” Ruffer says. “I knew he was dead and I had positively

identified the body."

As Ruffer continued to check bodies, someone said that a Marine had thrown himself on a grenade. The man was near the log that Ruffer had been next to during the night's firefight. Ruffer walked up to the dead Marine and saw a .45 pistol by his side. The man was wearing a Zodiac Sea Wolf wristwatch with a luminous dial. Ruffer remembered that dial moving during the night's battle. It belonged to combat photographer Bill Perkins.

Perkins' still camera was no longer with his body. Someone had picked it up and given it to Phil Hartranft with the message, "I think your buddy is dead."

"The Marine told me that Bill had jumped on a grenade," Hartranft says. "I didn't go to look at the body. I didn't really want to see him that way."

Dan Snell found two dead Vietnamese soldiers inside the Marine perimeter. Each one had been shot 20 to 40 times each. They were wearing shorts, rubber sandals and carried bandoliers of grenades. They had no other weapons. "Sanitary Bob" Headrick found a North Vietnamese flag on another corpse. Besides their lack of equipment, Snell was struck by how young the men were.

Dennis Antal was surprised to see that the battle had unfolded differently than he had perceived it the night before. "When daylight came, it seemed as if there was a whole other battle going on besides the one I had been in," he says. Even though the company had been arranged in a big circle the night before, he had felt like he and the men around him were distant from the rest of the company. He remembered the wounded around him screaming and calling for help. During the battle he looked around, and it seemed as if he and the others near him were the only ones doing the fighting. His inspection of the battlefield the next morning changed that perception. "When I looked around and saw all the devastation, I knew that we weren't the only ones. There were a lot of wounded. In fact, I don't think I saw anybody who wasn't wounded."

The smoky battlefield with splintered trees and the smell of sulfur and burnt grass made a lasting impression on Antal. "The whole thing seemed like something you would see in a horror picture. For my twelfth day in Nam, it was nothing like I had ever seen before."

In the light of day, Scott Thorne discovered that he was the only member of the TACP who wasn't wounded. Cpl Bob Sutton and PFC

Don Dehner had been taken down in the fierce battle.

Even the men of Delta Company were shocked as they inspected the battle zone. Many apologized to the men of Charlie for not getting there sooner.

Shortly after first light, Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti arrived on the devastated LZ. “It must have been a hell of a fight,” he remarked to Major as he examined the battlefield.

The Marines had not yet finished checking the perimeter for weapons and bodies, but Major told Belbusti the information he had at that point. The perilous events of the previous evening were apparent to Belbusti, who could see two enemy soldiers lying on the edge of the LZ where they had been killed.

Major also showed Belbusti the direction of attack, both NVA and Marine, briefed him on Marine and enemy casualties, and showed him all the dead NVA within the Marine perimeter.

“While talking to the Colonel, I was thinking that we had gotten into this mess because he gave me the order to get on that trail,” Major says. Even though he questioned the colonel’s order of the day before, Major did not bring the issue up. “It wasn’t my position to do that,” he says. “The meeting was professional: company commander to battalion commander.”

Belbusti was especially interested in knowing what damage Charlie Company had inflicted on the enemy, but that information wasn’t clear because the enemy didn’t leave weapons and bodies on the battlefield. Instead, the Charlie and Delta Company Marines found drag marks and blood where the enemy had removed the dead bodies.

But Major did tell the Colonel what he thought was the truth: “I told the Colonel that I thought that the NVA hurt us more than we hurt them. He didn’t like hearing that. No commander likes to hear that. I came to that conclusion because I knew how many casualties we had and we didn’t find that many enemy bodies. I just think that they inflicted more casualties on us than we did on them.” Later intelligence would show that the Americans had, in fact, inflicted serious casualties on the North Vietnamese, but Major couldn’t tell that from what he saw that morning on the battlefield.

Standing nearby, George Boze watched as Major talked to the Lieutenant Colonel. “You could see from Bill Major’s face and Belbusti’s face that Belbusti was not amused,” he says. “I could see

that it was not a pleasant discussion between the two of them."

Belbusti was concerned that the dead had yet to be removed from the battlefield. "It was not good to have the dead there." Belbusti says. "It was very demoralizing for the men who took part in the battle. What keeps running through your mind is: 'There but for the grace of God, am I.' That will drive you crazy." Belbusti ordered Major to have the American dead evacuated and to have the enemy dead buried. The Lieutenant Colonel was on the battlefield for ten to fifteen minutes. He and his command group then returned to their original position at the battalion command post.

After the Lieutenant Colonel left, Major's top priority was to get the remaining wounded out and get re-supplied so that Charlie Company could continue to move forward. But helicopters were in short supply because Marines on another operation had also engaged the enemy. "We didn't have the support that I would have liked to see," Major says.

Delta consolidated and expanded the perimeter, improved the LZ, and did its best to get choppers in to medevac the wounded. Most of the Charlie Company men were dazed, not talking and still recovering from the intense combat. "Nobody was asking if so and so got hit or have you seen him," Antal says. "They were all quiet."

The most disquieting element of the battle scene was the sight of the dead and wounded. The dead Marines were stacked next to each other face up. The wounded were placed next to the dead. Those men with the most critical wounds had been taken out first.

Combat artist Mike Leahy flew into the LZ on a supply chopper. He jumped out, M14 in hand, as cardboard cases of supplies were hurriedly pitched out of the craft and wounded Marines loaded aboard in their place. Knowing the dangers that lurked around the LZ, he arrived with full field pack, grenades, and ammunition, prepared for battle. But he wasn't prepared for the shock of what greeted him. He was overwhelmed by the smell of shattered trees and brush that told the story of the violent battle. "The oozing sap filled my nostrils with a feeling of immediacy, fright, and the desire to be ready for anything that might happen in that tiny LZ," he says. Next, he smelled the pungent odor of death and immediately saw the source. The dead Marines had been carefully lined up and placed under ponchos. Enemy dead lay where they fell, scattered around the perimeter in grotesque positions, some missing body parts, one

missing his head. Leahy saw weapons and equipment in a pile on the LZ, and he detected another puzzling odor that he couldn't quite place.

Phil Seymour watched as the Marine major jumped from the chopper and surveyed his surroundings. *This guy has got to be crazy,* Seymour thought. *He's getting off a perfectly good helicopter to get onto this LZ.*

Because of his head wound, Mike Cole had lost consciousness during the night. He awoke to find it was morning and that he was propped up against a downed tree. His feet were on the path and to his right was the pile of bodies covered with ponchos. Through the fog, he saw toppled and splintered trees and thought it looked like a hurricane or tornado had roared through. Even though he could see the devastation, he couldn't hear anything because of the loud constant ringing in his ears. He held his right ear as if to keep the sound from going in.

"It was very painful," he says. "There was so much pain that I felt that the right side of my face had been blown off."

Antal was next to Cole. Bandages covered his legs. He told a corpsman that Cole couldn't hear and was in a great deal of pain. "Denny was my security person," Cole says. "I still didn't know what was going on. He was making sure that they weren't going to forget me."

George Boze was still in his crater when daylight came. Like the other Marines, he began to move around once he could see. In the back of the crater, he noticed a piece of shrapnel stuck in a tree. That shrapnel had killed Roger Walton the evening before.

He thought his area of the battlefield looked like it had been cut down with an old-fashioned scythe. "Anything that was living was blown to pieces and left very short stubs. The closer you got to the berms of these two bomb craters, the shorter anything living got. It was like someone got in there with a machete, got on his hands and knees and just started haphazardly cutting stuff down. If you had fallen on this, you would have been impaled. The stumps were about a foot tall, splintered and sharp. This was all green wood. It was hard to believe that we survived after seeing what our perimeter looked like and what we had to fight from."

Rod Lewis walked up to the top of the LZ. He noticed something hanging off a bush. The teeth of an NVA soldier who had been shot

point blank by a grenade launcher were hanging by a shred of skin.

Even though the medevac choppers had been called away, a re-supply helicopter arrived at about 7:30 AM, bringing rifle ammunition, grenades, and mortar rounds. After lowering the supplies, it set down so the Marines could load five more casualties. A chopper carrying much-needed water arrived next, but it drew enemy fire and retreated.

Later that morning, Boze was put in charge of the burial detail for the dead North Vietnamese. The bodies had been placed in makeshift shelter halves. They were contributing to the strong odor on the LZ and had to be removed. Earlier, Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti had ordered Boze to give them a decent burial. Boze and Snell cautiously took the bodies 15 to 20 yards down the trail. There was always the constant danger of ambush. Off the trail, the men found a steep ravine. The enemy bodies were thrown over the edge. It wasn't wise to spend time digging graves in the jungle for the enemy dead. The NVA were still in the area and could attack the Americans at any time. In any case, Boze was not inclined at the time to treat the enemy dead with a great deal of respect. "I was very upset about the loss of my friends the night before," he says.

Snell had mixed emotions as he performed the grisly task: "I got no pleasure whatsoever out of killing or even shooting at the enemy," he says. "At the time, I thought that if I could kill them, maybe it would stop them from killing me. It was one less person that I was going to have to worry about at the moment. There is something very horrible about killing someone who was somebody's brother, husband, or son. There was something horrible about taking them out in the jungle and throwing them into a ravine. That person deserved a good funeral. He deserved to have people know what happened to him just like the rest of us."

Slowly, the light and heat of the sun intensified. The light was a bright contrast to the pitch-blackness the men had fought in the night before. It also intensified the smell of death. The jungle was lined with blood trails where the enemy had dragged away their dead and wounded. "Everything was covered with flies," Snell recalls. "The blood was just a magnet. In that hot, humid jungle, things rot very fast." There was no breeze to carry the odor of dead bodies and rotten vegetation away. "That smell stayed and intensified the whole time we were there. It didn't go away."

Ruffer sat on a log next to the wounded. His ears were ringing and his lower back was numb. He hadn't slept. His stomach was upset. He hadn't eaten in 24 hours, so he got out a can of peaches from his pack, thinking the sugar would give him a boost. After the third bite, he vomited bright red liquid. A nearby corpsman looked over and said, "What the hell is that?"

"I don't know," Ruffer said.

After he threw up, Ruffer was able to drink a little water. As he drank, he watched as the corpsmen were preparing the dead to be lifted out. Their wrists and ankles were tied together because the stiffness of rigor mortis makes dead bodies unwieldy and difficult to maneuver through the door of the chopper. He had avoided going over to the pile of dead Americans covered with ponchos. "You didn't really want to go over to look," he says. "You knew that if you did, it was going to be in your memory for the rest of your life."

The water went through Ruffer quickly. When he got up to urinate, he produced a solid column of red. A corpsman saw the blood in Ruffer's urine. "Sit down," he said. He pulled out a medevac tag and started writing. Ruffer hoped that he would survive when he saw Puff come on station, but now he was again concerned that he might not leave the jungle alive.

Like all the Marines, Ed Yates expected another surprise ground attack by the NVA at any moment. The men of Second Platoon scanned the jungle, looking for any movement. Suddenly, Yates and the others heard rustling in the trees above them. Were the North Vietnamese back? Were they about to drop grenades on the unsuspecting Marines again? The Americans weren't about to take that chance. They sprayed the foliage with bullets. Monkeys started screaming and falling out of the trees.

The tension of the situation – memories of the night before, the constant threat of new attack, the sight of the dead and wounded, the smell of blood – finally got to one Marine who had been attached to Charlie Company from a rear unit. The man grabbed a pistol and ran off, shooting into the jungle. Several other Marines tackled him, brought him back to the LZ, and tied him up.

"Please don't do this to me," the Marine said, still clutching a pistol. "Don't do this to me."

The other men strapped him to a stretcher and loaded him onto a chopper, pistol in hand. He wouldn't release the weapon, so the other

Marines ejected the magazine and the round in the chamber while strapping him in.

Phil Seymour believes that men in the line companies like Charlie and Delta were in better shape mentally to handle trauma like Medina:

"My perception generally is that the guys who were in the field day in and day out were much better able to handle the stress of combat, even that experienced on Medina. But the guys who were in the rear and who were not exposed to combat on somewhat of a regular basis tended to have more problems if and when they were thrown into a stressful situation such as occurred during Medina."

Antal and Cole were among the last men to be taken out. As he waited, Antal remembers seeing about 20 Marines with life threatening wounds lying near him. One Marine was missing an arm but was still alive, drifting in and out of consciousness. The others were wrapped with bandages soaked with bright, intense red blood.

The sight made Antal ashamed of his relatively minor wounds. "I remember sitting there while Delta Company and the rest of Charlie Company were policing the area," he says. "They were widening the perimeter. I thought that I should be doing that; that I shouldn't be sitting there with the wounded. But they sat me down and they wouldn't move me."

Lieutenant Robert Anderson, commander of Second Platoon, had collapsed from a dangerously high fever. Initially he resisted Major's suggestion to get on one of the choppers, but he eventually gave in.

"I told him that he would probably end up being more of a burden than helpful because of his illness if we ended up having to carry him out," Major says.

Platoon leader Paul Nelson had been taken out after the initial ambush on the trail. Now Anderson and Ruffer were going. "All three of my platoon commanders were out of action before the operation was finished," Major says. "I can't tell you how comforting it is to have good, competent platoon commanders. It was very disappointing to have them gone. Without the officer leadership of my platoons, I was going to recommend that Delta Company take over the lead of the operation. I didn't think that we should be leading the battalion."

Because of the lack of leadership, including many squad and fireteam leaders who were out of action, Major and Gunny

Thompson stayed with the company even though both men had been wounded.

At one point in the morning, Steve Kane walked up to a corpsman and said that his eardrums had been blown out.

"Are you sure?" the corpsman asked.

Kane took a puff of his cigarette, closed his mouth, and blew the smoke out of his ears.

"OK, you gotta go," the corpsman said. "After the seriously wounded are gone."

Antal was eventually placed on a helicopter with two dead Marines. He looked at the door gunner. The door gunner stared back. The two stared at each other the entire flight, not speaking, not looking out the window, and definitely not looking down at the two dead Marines next to them.

"He just stared at me and I just stared at him," Antal says. "It was a stare that said, 'What's going on here?'" Antal also questioned his own mixed feelings. He was glad to be alive but somehow ashamed that he was still alive. "I couldn't quite understand that."

Kane was also taken out on one of the last flights. Ruffer refused to be taken out until all of the other wounded Marines were taken out first. At about 3 p.m., almost six hours after the corpsman saw the column of blood in his urine, Ruffer was placed on a chopper.

Many of the men tried to avoid the sight of the remaining dead bodies covered in ponchos. "You were drawn to look at dead Marines, but at the same time, you didn't want to look at them," Snell says. "Some of the guys had a dog tag on their boot laces. The thing that wasn't wrapped up was their boots. Flies were buzzing all around. They were laying on their backs wrapped up in their ponchos like mummies."

Lewis was glad he couldn't see the wrapped bodies but he could smell the blood as he helped load the dead men onto the choppers. When one of the choppers came in, the wind from the rotors blew the poncho off one of the bodies. Lewis recognized the man. He had been shot right between the eyes.

Boze helped load the body of Bill Perkins onto the chopper. Although Perkins had been with Charlie for a short time, he had made a favorable impression. "Perkins was a very likeable guy," Boze says. "Even to this very day, it still boggles the mind that he was killed because he had no business being that close to the fighting. He

wanted to be with the point company at all times to get the pictures."

Hartranft was so dazed by the intense combat and by Perkins' death that he forgot everything he had been taught in combat correspondent's school. "I didn't write a thing," he says. "When I look back, I don't know why. The only thing that I can think of is that I was just so thankful to be alive that I just wanted to get on that helicopter and get out. It was like a bad memory." After the dead and wounded were removed, Hartranft and about five others left on a helicopter that had brought in supplies. "It was a long ride back, especially when I thought about Perkins," he says. When he reported back to his superiors, he told them that his "walk in the park" was over.

Radioman Mark Anderson was too busy coordinating medevacs and re-supply flights to walk the battlefield. "It was my job to stay on that radio and keep these guys coming in. We were going to be out of water, food and ammo. I had to get that stuff in." Earlier, he had been chewed out for allowing his antennae to get chopped off. Drinking some bad C-Ration coffee, he thought *here I've done whatever I could to get these poor guys out of here and I still get my ass reamed.*

The Americans counted 44 dead NVA from the battle and confiscated 12 automatic rifles, a machine gun, an RPG-2 rocket launcher, and numerous grenades from dead soldiers.

Some Marines dug in to protect the area in case of attack. Others continued to police the battlefield. Another Marine was wounded when he engaged two NVA soldiers who were probing the Marine defenses. One of the communists was killed, but the other was wounded and escaped.

Gunny Thompson barked commands to the outgoing patrols and other Marines as they took up their positions. He was talking to Captain Major and combat artist Leahy when suddenly machine guns went off somewhere to the west. Gunny Thompson swore. "I told the machine gunners not to shoot and give away their positions. I told them to use grenades."

The three men felt the concussion of an artillery shell landing nearby. Leahy heard a whizzing sound, and a piece of shrapnel landed on the ground between the men – a wicked, jagged piece of metal several inches across. Leahy bent over to pick it up and immediately dropped it.

“Hot?” Gunny Thompson asked wryly. The men laughed, a welcome respite from the horrors of battle.

Some of the helicopters that came in were able to bring in supplies. Some didn’t. “We needed ammunition, food and water,” Major says. “Believe it or not, we got a case of ping-pong balls.”

The Marines did get some ammunition, but they were still desperately short of water and C-Rations. Any water and rations found among the packs of the dead and wounded were distributed to the men. But most of the water had gone to the casualties.

“I’ve never been so thirsty in my life,” Thorne remembers.

“The need for water is vital in those climatic conditions,” Ruffer says. “It was hot, humid, in triple-canopy with no wind or breeze. Every 1,000 meters you walked, you went through at least a quart of perspiration. This had to be replaced. We went to the field with at least two canteens per Marine. We were supposed to be re-supplied, but we never made it to the re-supply point before being ambushed. Some Marines were able to fill their canteens at the river crossing.”

Major informed Belbusti about the shortage of water. Belbusti suggested sending a patrol down to the creek, but the skipper didn’t want to risk another firefight that far from the company position.

In the afternoon, the weapons of the dead and wounded and any equipment that could not be used, such as packs, web gear, and clothing were put in a large pile near the center of the battlefield. A bag that contained William Perkins’ movie camera was placed on that pile. But the choppers that were going to take the gear out couldn’t come in. The Americans couldn’t leave all of that equipment for the enemy. So, instead of moving out toward the original objective, Charlie Company ended up staying on that little knoll all day.

Major prepared for an enemy attack. He sent out short patrols, not more than 500 meters in front of the company position. “I didn’t want any Marines to get ambushed when we weren’t prepared to keep moving,” he says. Now armed with a fresh stock of ammunition, Charlie Company held the same perimeter that they held on 12 October. Delta resumed its original position back up the trail.

The night of 13 October was relatively quiet. The Marines were probed by the enemy just before dark, but no one was injured. The Americans had a hard time sleeping. The images of the violent battle just 24 hours earlier was still in their minds. Throughout the long

night, they kept wondering when the North Vietnamese would come back.

14October

The next morning, the Marines continued to wait. They waited for helicopters that would bring them water and that would pick up the extra equipment. The pile was about 10 feet high and 20 feet wide. It consisted of at least 50 rifles, packs, weapons, and other gear. Finally, around noon, word came that there were no helicopters available to collect the equipment. Major was ordered to blow up the pile of gear in order to keep it out of enemy hands. After that task was accomplished, Charlie Company was to withdraw and tie into Delta Company. The two companies were to position themselves in a "reverse slope defense." This meant that Charlie and Delta would occupy the lower part of the back-side of a hill. If any enemy attacked, they would be silhouetted against the sky as they came over the top.

Most of the Marines were required to carry a two-pound block of C-4 explosive. About 50 pounds of C-4 was collected and placed at the base of the equipment pile. When the charges and timers were set, the Marines began to withdraw from the little knoll. As they were pulling back, Leahy noticed a green bag that looked like a Navy corpsman's medical kit on the pile. The bag looked strangely out of place. He grabbed it. Inside, there was a movie camera and film. The bag belonged to Bill Perkins. Leahy kept the bag and its contents safely in his possession until the undeveloped film could be turned over to Marine Headquarters.

When the Marines were safely out of range, the timers went off and the C-4 was detonated.

"It was a hell of an explosion," says Mike Robinson, who had helped prepare the pile for demolition. "It was enough to blow up the city of Oshkosh."

The purpose of blowing up the equipment was to keep it out of enemy hands. The explosion was probably only partially successful. "The stuff wasn't really blown up," says Mark Anderson. "It just blew all over the place."

Re-Supply Patrol

After the gear was blown, Charlie Company withdrew to the next

ridge over. This was the same piece of terrain that they had occupied on the afternoon of 12 October before the ambush, two days prior. Charlie Company tied in with Delta, creating a large two- company circular perimeter. Major described the positions of the two companies: “If you compare our positions to the face of a clock, Delta, at the top of the hill, occupied the nine, twelve and three o’clock positions. Charlie would tie in at three, occupy six and tie back around at the nine o’clock position.” The two companies dug in defensive positions and prepared for nightfall.

The battalion command group was, as the crow flies, at least 300 yards away from the Charlie-Delta Company position. Charlie and Delta were on one hill; the Battalion CP was on the next rise over. A saddleback ridge separated the two hills. The ridge dropped off steeply on either side. A trail followed the ridge and connected the two positions. The terrain was covered with dense foliage, so the Americans couldn’t see the trail from one position to the other. Generally, in such situations, Marine listening posts would be set up on the ridge between the two positions. This, however, was not done.

Word came down from Delta Company that men were needed for a re-supply patrol for much needed food and water. The patrol would go to the battalion command group. They would have to take the trail on the saddleback ridge to reach their objective.

Coss, Zorn and Yates were taking a much needed break. Oliver Bell, who was new to Second Platoon, was with them. “Oliver was telling me that since he had a brother serving in the Air Force, he (Oliver) might be pulled out of the combat zone.” Zorn says.

Gunny Thompson walked up to the Marines.

“I need volunteers for a re-supply patrol,” he said.

Zorn and Coss looked at each other. They weren’t about to volunteer for anything. Bell saw the reluctance on their faces.

Bell raised a hand. “I’ll do it.”

“Don’t do it, man,” one Marine warned.

“You ain’t got to go out there in that crap,” Yates said. “You don’t have to volunteer.”

“I want to,” Bell said, getting up to follow Gunny Thompson.

Although Yates hadn’t known Bell for very long, he had liked him from the start. “He had one hell of a personality,” Yates recalls. “He was always laughing. Nothing seemed to get him down.” Yates didn’t want his good-natured friend to volunteer for that patrol.

Morgan Bice sat talking with George Hutchings. They had spent the night two nights before in a fighting hole filled with water. Tired of wet feet, Hutchings removed one boot and one sock – he had learned to never take off both boots at once because danger could pop up at any moment. Just then, Gunny Thompson walked up.

"Hutchings, we need another man for the water detail," Gunny said as he walked past.

"Damn it," Hutchings said under his breath as he tried to wring out his sock. "I'm tired of this shit."

"I'll go," Bice said. The bold Texan grabbed his rifle and followed Gunny Thompson before Hutchings could react.

Gunny Thompson took six Charlie Company Marines, including Bice, Bell, George Boze, and sniper R.J Jackson, and turned them over to Gunny Pelkey of Delta. Pelkey had selected six Delta Company men to complete the patrol, including Corpsman Dick Conklin. The 12 men gathered on top of the hill, which was part of Delta Company's position.

The men quickly headed down the trail cut by the Marines two days before. Bice and Bell were at the front of the line; Jackson was third or fourth. The group walked down the hill from Delta's position then walked up the incline to the saddleback ridge.

As they walked, Jackson could see that they were approaching a small clearing. From experience, he had learned not to proceed into any open areas. A clearing was a prime ambush site. The better approach would be to go around it.

Jackson watched as Bice and Bell walked into the open. He paused at the clearing's edge.

Suddenly, grenades came flying in on Bell and Bice. A shock wave of explosions followed in quick succession. The now all too familiar crack of AK47 fire came next. The two Marines were trapped in a deadly hail of shrapnel and bullets.

A brilliant flash of white light knocked Jackson off his feet. Shards of scalding metal bore into his arm and chest. He fell unconscious to the jungle floor.

Marines who had occupied the position the day before had dug fighting holes on the edge of the trail. The nine remaining men scrambled for those holes and the small amount of cover that they offered. Grenades and small arms fire came in from all directions. The NVA were attacking from the front as well as up the steep sides

of the ravine.

After Hutchings had laced up his boots he ran to the edge of the perimeter, only to see the patrol disappear into the foliage on the saddleback ridge. Suddenly, he heard the woods explode.

Marines from Charlie and Delta Company rushed forward and tried to put some fire on the North Vietnamese who were attacking the patrol, but the terrain made their efforts relatively ineffective. “The Marines couldn’t put much fire on the NVA because they had to fire from an oblique angle,” Major says. “It was a hard, steep angle because the NVA were in the saddleback with the step cliffs on each side.” Also, the Marines couldn’t fire randomly because the members of the re-supply patrol had scattered and could be hit by friendly fire.

Near the trail, Jackson slowly regained consciousness. He could tell that the Marines and NVA were locked in combat. An incessant ringing filled his ears. His left arm was tucked underneath his body and he couldn’t feel it. He thought that it had been blown off. He looked at his rifle. The M16 had been peppered with shrapnel and was useless. He could see the NVA soldiers nearby, shooting at positions behind him and throwing grenades. Unlike the night of 12 October, the landscape and daylight allowed for a better view of the enemy. They wore light green uniforms, pith helmets, and carried AK47s. Jackson distinctly remembers the banana clips on their rifles. Because the North Vietnamese were so close and he couldn’t move his left side, Jackson closed his eyes and lay still.

“He’s alive!” he heard someone shout.

He turned his head slightly and saw a Marine dug in about 10 yards away.

“Come on back here!” the Marine yelled. “No!” Jackson replied.

“Why not?”

“They’re not shooting at me here.” “Good point.”

The NVA were throwing grenades as fast as they could pull the pins. Boze, who had jumped into a fighting hole, fired back. Suddenly, an NVA grenadier appeared in front of him wearing a pith helmet and green uniform. He was throwing grenades from a large bag. As he threw his last grenade, Boze fired two rounds into the soldier’s chest. The blasts sent the soldier tumbling back down the hill.

The communist’s grenade, however, was headed straight toward George Boze.

“Jesus Christ,” Boze said, hunching his head down between his shoulders.

The explosive hit the top of Boze’s helmet and fell. The last thing he remembered was a flash of white and a searing pain on the right side of his face. The blast blew Boze out of the hollow and down the side of the hill.

Corpsman Dick Conklin saw Boze get hit. *He’s dead,* Conklin thought, turning to focus his attention on the wounded men around him, trying not to notice the enemy soldiers charging his position.

The NVA attack lasted only five or six minutes. Then, the enemy melted back into the deadly jungle. When the firing stopped, Yates, Hutchings and other Marines rushed to the scene. The smell of blood, flesh, and explosives permeated the area. No Marines were left standing. All appeared to be wounded or killed.

Yates stopped at the place where the men were first ambushed. He saw Bell’s remains scattered by the blast of fragmentation grenades, his trunk separated from his arms and legs. Yates helped carry Bell’s body back to Charlie Company’s position. He then returned to the scene.

The fact that Boze lay unconscious down the hill could easily have gone unnoticed. Boze was part of H&S Company. He was attached to Charlie Company for Operation Medina. No one in Charlie or Delta Company really knew him. Doc Conklin, however, knew that a Marine had been blown down the hill. Yates and the other Marines began to search for him.

After the fighting died down, Jackson winced in pain as a corpsman began to pull him by his trouser leg into a nearby hole. Jackson realized that he still had his left arm, but the arm and shoulder were riddled with metal fragments. His front was bloody from shrapnel that had blown into his chest. He could hardly hear anything. Instead, an incessant, painful ringing filled his ears.

“Are you all right?” the corpsman asked once they were in the crater.

“Yeah, ’till you threw me in this damn hole,” Jackson said, cringing in pain.

Intermittent fire continued as a corpsman bandaged Jackson’s wounds.

Hutchings raced to the scene, but couldn’t find Bice. Near the point of the ambush, he looked down and saw a pair of boots. One of the

boots had Bice's name written on it. He clutched the boot in disbelief. Like Oliver Bell, Morgan Bice had been decimated by the barrage of NVA grenades. Hutchings was stunned. The friend who had gone on the patrol in his place was dead.

Yates finally found Boze about 50 feet down the side of the mountain. Boze was bloody, battered, and didn't seem to be breathing. He had no weapons on him, and his wallet was missing. The North Vietnamese had searched his body before Yates and the others arrived, as they frequently did with dead American troops. Yates assumed that Boze, like the other members of the ill-fated re-supply patrol, was dead. Yates helped carry his body back to Charlie Company's position.

Boze, however, was not dead. He had probably been wounded by a concussion rather than a fragmentation grenade. About three weeks later, he woke up at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. He had been in a coma since he had been blown down the side of that mountain. At about the same time, Boze's wallet was turned into the Battalion Headquarters. It had been found on the body of a dead NVA soldier.

Jackson was carried back to the Charlie-Delta perimeter to await evacuation. As he lay there with the rest of the wounded, he heard a familiar voice.

"I thought you were dead!"

Jackson turned to see his sniper partner, Rod Lewis. Lewis had been in shock at the loss of Jackson. Even though he was severely wounded, Lewis was grateful that his friend was still alive.

A cold feeling, however, struck Jackson. He looked around at the dead and wounded from the patrol. A short time before he had been walking along with these men, all alive. Now five were dead. Jackson was wounded but alive. He had plenty of time to ponder that fact. He wasn't evacuated until the next day.

That night, in order to prevent further infiltration by the NVA between Battalion and the Charlie-Delta Company position, listening posts were set up along the ridge that connected the two units.

While others kept watch, some Marines slept on the wet ground, wrapped inside their ponchos. They were spread out on a steep hillside. Sometime during the night, a Marine near Dan Snell woke up with a start. He began to scream. The Marines around him awoke, tense and alert. Were the North Vietnamese attacking again? Had they infiltrated the American position?

Soon, one Marine began to laugh. Then another joined in. While the man was sleeping, a leech had attached itself to his bottom lip. The man inhaled and sucked the creature into his mouth. That woke him up. He was confused and disoriented until a buddy calmed him down, held a lit cigarette to the Marine's lip, and burned off the leech. The men had a good laugh and then tried to get what sleep they could.

15 October

The next morning, the decision was made at the regimental or division level to discontinue the original mission. Charlie Company would not, after all, be headed toward Regimental Objective 5. Instead, the entire battalion would head back to LZ Dove. Bravo and H&S Companies would lead the way out, followed by Delta then Charlie. The men would follow the same path that they had carved in the jungle on 11 and 12 October.

"I made the decision to go out the way we came," Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti says. "We looked at a map and decided that that was the best way out of there and we took it." Following the same route was a dangerous move. The Americans would be prime targets for ambush. The NVA knew exactly where they were heading. The path, however, was the fastest way out.

Charlie and Delta left their position on the hill that day. At the beginning of Operation Medina, Charlie Company was the point of the spear for the entire battalion. Now, they occupied an equally dangerous position: the rear guard. A retreating army was always an inviting target for an aggressive foe. As the rear guard, it was Charlie and Delta Company's duty to fend off any North Vietnamese attacks.

That afternoon, it began to rain. The ground became slippery and even more treacherous. Luckily, the day passed without an attack. That evening, Charlie Company set up a perimeter defense on the spot occupied by the Battalion HQ the night before. That night, more heavy rains came. The rain would continue off and on for the next several days.

16 October

The next morning, the Marines set out once again. The men continued to struggle with the rough, wet terrain. As a result of the treacherous conditions, one Marine fell and broke his back. He had

to be medevaced out. Psychologically, the exhausted men had to cope with the constant fear of yet another deadly ambush.

That afternoon, the Americans reached the fast moving stream that they had crossed on 11 October. After three days of rain, what had once been a mountain stream was now a rough river with a raging, strong current. It was wider, deeper, and faster. Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti, Bravo, and H&S Company crossed a much tamer river the day before. Now, the heavy rain had taken its toll.

Major radioed back to Belbusti that the river was an obstacle and that the men would need time to devise a way to cross it.

"Well, I expect you up here before dark." Belbusti replied.

"Roger that," Major said. "We'll figure out something."

The skipper had been a competitive swimmer in college. He also had extensive reconnaissance, scuba, and parachute training. Now, he put that training to good use. He and Gunny Thompson located an area on the riverbank where two large trees faced each other, one on each bank. Thompson would use C-4 to blow the tree on the near bank. With any luck, it would fall across the river. Major would swim across the river to the opposite tree. He would then pull over a pack containing C-4 and detonators. That tree too, would be blown, falling across the river to the opposite side. The two trees, landing side by side, would act as a bridge for Charlie Company. That, at least, was the plan.

Major removed his equipment and green utilities. Naked, the Captain faced the menacing river. He tied a 100-foot long rappelling line around his waist and prepared to cross.

Then, the rain began to taper off. Only about two hours of light remained for the Americans to make the crossing. Time was of the essence. Major knew that the company commander normally would not be the one undertaking this assignment. There simply wasn't enough time to pass the word down the line to see if any other Marine was an exceptionally strong swimmer.

The skipper walked up the bank about 25 feet from where they hoped to blow the trees. He knew that the current would pull him down stream. He hoped that he had enough distance to make the crossing at the point where the trees were located. As darkness began to descend into the jungle, the Captain dove into the heavy current. Major was an excellent swimmer, but the current was too strong. Halfway across, the torrent started to sweep him away. His Marines

had to pull him back.

On his second attempt, Major started from about 50 feet up the bank. This time, he succeeded. Alone on the opposite side, he untied the line and secured it around a large tree. He then pulled across a waterproof pack that contained C-4 and detonators.

Since Gunny Thompson had the majority of the explosives, he blew the first tree. It fell the wrong way, so they had to select another site. The second tree fell in the right direction. Major blew the one across the river, and it fell right along side the one the Gunny blew. Finally, the Marines were getting lucky.

As soon as the skipper made it back across the river and got dressed, the radio lit up. One of the platoons at the tail end of the company was getting stones thrown at it. This was a common enemy tactic designed to get the Marines to open fire and reveal their positions.

The enemy soon abandoned stones for small arms fire. A firefight broke out between the enemy and the Charlie Company rear guard, which had been set up in a perimeter defense while the river crossing was being prepared. Major ordered the Gunny to respond with M16s but to hold off on any automatic weapons fire. He didn't want those positions exposed. The Captain didn't want a heavy firefight, so he called in artillery to push the enemy away quickly. The company still had to get across the river before it got dark.

The artillery unit was ten to fifteen miles away. With respect to artillery fire, Company C was in a bad spot. For the rounds to fall on the enemy, they would have to fly directly over the Marines' position. If an artillery round were short, it would fall on the Americans. In other words, the Marines were on the gun target line.

Second Platoon was providing security for the company rear. Snell, Coss, Zorn, Yates, Dougherty and Sgt Warf were on the edge of a large bomb crater.

It was almost dark when the artillery rounds began to roar over their heads.

As he sat on the edge of the crater, listening to the artillery screaming overhead, Snell tried to think positive thoughts. He knew Charlie Company was close to being out of the jungle and finished with the operation. He thought about how nice it would be to have dry socks, clean clothes, real food, and a good night's sleep.

Suddenly, a horrendous roar filled the air. Something, whatever it

was, sounded like a boxcar going 600 miles an hour. It came screaming toward Snell. As it got closer, the monster changed pitch and sounded like the wail of a banshee. The noise was so loud that the men in the crater could physically feel it.

An American artillery round, fired with damp powder, was landing short into the Marine position. The round was headed directly at Dan Snell. “We were all within two or three feet of each other,” Dougherty recalls. “It was like it picked him out from among the rest of us.” The explosive screamed louder and louder. As he realized what was happening, Snell tried to dive out of the way, but he was a little too slow.

The shell exploded in the trees with a deafening blast. Coss and Zorn were blown into the air. Zorn landed with a thud. His neck stung from gravel and dirt that had been blasted into it. Thinking the round was an enemy mortar, he quickly found his M16. He expected North Vietnamese to pour out of the jungle any moment. Instead, he heard a voice come from the bottom of the crater.

“I’m hit…. I’m hit….”

Zorn crawled to the edge of crater. He saw Dan Snell at the bottom. He scrambled to his wounded friend.

“JJ… look at my leg… look at my leg…”

Shards of metal shattered Dan Snell’s tibia, tore his femoral artery and severed a nerve. Most of his fibula (the small bone that parallels the tibia) and calf muscle were torn away.

“For a guy who was wounded as badly as he was, he was talking relatively calmly,” Zorn recalls. “Most of the lower part of his leg was blown away. All I saw was his shinbone. I was trying to control myself. It flipped me out that he was so calm. I would have been screaming.”

“JJ… get me a blanket… I’m going into shock.” Snell said.

For the first few seconds, Snell didn’t feel any pain. He reached down to his wounded leg. The first place he touched felt like warm hamburger meat. His thigh was covered with blood. He reached to check his crotch and discovered that the round had missed the area by a few inches. He could feel part of his tibia poking out through his leg. Then, a wave of mind numbing, excruciating pain shot through his body. It was as if a red-hot poker was being seared into his leg.

Doc Hammergren quickly arrived and administered a shot of morphine. “The shell fragment just about tore his leg off,” Dougherty

says. “He was screaming in pain. We held him down while Doc worked on him. All we could do was hold Dan down and tell him he was going to be all right.”

Hammergren tried to control the bleeding with large compression bandages. Once he realized how severe Snell’s wounds were, he had some Marines cut branches and splint the bad leg to the uninjured one.

It was getting dark. Snell was bleeding fast. The American was in grave danger. When a femoral artery is severed, the victim can bleed to death within minutes.

Hammergren applied a hemostat (a surgical instrument that stops bleeding by clamping a blood vessel) to the femoral artery. The bleeding slowed, but it didn’t stop. Snell got thirsty and cold. He was going into shock. Some of the other men gave him some water and a blanket, but it was clear Snell would perish if he didn’t reach a hospital quickly.

Doc Hammergren got on the radio and told the Captain that Snell would die unless he was medevaced out immediately. He would not survive the trip by foot across the turbulent river to battalion. Major called Belbusti and said he was going to call in a medevac helicopter to pick up the wounded man.

“No!” Belbusti replied. “By direct order, you are not to call in medevacs.” The Lieutenant Colonel’s order made some tactical sense. The hovering helicopter would reveal Charlie Company’s position to the enemy, and the heavy river separated Charlie from reinforcements. Delta Company would not be able to come to Charlie’s aid if they were attacked again.

“There’s no way we can get this wounded Marine across the creek,” the skipper replied. Major explained to Belbusti that the river he had crossed earlier was now a raging torrent. Attempting to transport a critically wounded man across the river would not only be very dangerous, but would also cost critical time. Snell was bleeding to death.

“Do it. Cross the river,” Belbusti replied. “A medevac will be called in once you get here.”

Major was now in a tough spot. “I understand his approach,” he says of Belbusti’s order. “It was his way of telling me to ‘make it happen.’ But there are certain things that you can do and certain things that you can’t do.”

There was no way that the skipper could call in a medevac without Belbusti knowing it. Major hiked back the couple of hundred yards to check on his wounded men. (Sgt Warf had been wounded in the shoulder by the same round that hit Snell). Hammergren and the other corpsmen said that the Snell would not survive the time it would take to get to LZ Dove, even if the stream were not treacherous. After crossing the river, the wounded men would have to be carried up a long hill to the LZ.

An HST radio operator stood nearby. “You know,” the operator said to the Captain “you can’t do it, but I can do it. I have direct contact back to the rear. Why don’t I call in the medevac?” The HST approach bypassed battalion completely. The call would go directly from the HST radio operator to the helicopter squadron.

“Call in the medevac,” Major said.

The helicopter flew in directly over the hill where the battalion command post was located. Major and his men were located in a valley at the base of that hill. The helicopter couldn’t land in the dense forest, so the pilot hovered over the Marine position. The medevac lowered a stokes litter by cable down through the trees. The chopper was clearly exposed to any enemy troops hiding in the dense foliage. The helicopter was a sitting duck.

Immediately, Captain Major got a call from Belbusti. “What’s going on?” he demanded.

“This Marine will die if I don’t get him a medevac,” Major said. “Did you call in the medevac?” Belbusti asked.

“Yes I did.”

“I gave you a direct order not to.”

“I’m aware of that, sir,” Major said. “It was my decision and I will take the consequences.”

“The consequences?” Belbusti responded. “You’re right. You are relieved of duty.”

Major dropped the radio and found Gunny Thompson. “I’ve been relieved of duty,” Major said. “You’re next in line to command.”

“You gotta be shittin’ me,” the Gunny said.

Major knew that Belbusti had a logical reason for not calling in a medevac. If the helicopter was shot down as it hovered over the dense forest, the crew, if they lived, would have to be rescued. It was getting dark. A rescue would also require reinforcements, but the reinforcements likely wouldn’t arrive in time. Many men could die.

The skipper, however, also knew that Belbusti didn't realize the problem the turbulent river was causing. "If he had, I'm sure he would have sent a unit down to reinforce us on the other side of the creek," Major says.

The artillery rounds had opened a hole in the jungle canopy. The chopper located the opening and lowered the litter down through it. Coss, blood streaming out of his ears from the artillery explosion, helped carry Snell the short distance to the litter. Snell was in agonizing pain.

"When they picked me up for the very first time, I could feel every bone in my leg that was broken move around," he says. "It was like: *crunch*, *crunch, crunch, crunch.* I now think how lucky I was that they didn't try to carry me across that river back to that LZ. I was extraordinarily lucky to have been medevaced out."

Snell was loaded in the litter. The cable holding the litter was attached to a winch inside the chopper. The winch began to pull Snell up through the canopy. Then, without warning, the cable jammed. Snell, blood seeping out of the torn artery in his leg, was stranded beneath the chopper, hanging by a thread over the Vietnamese jungle.

Captain Major watched anxiously. If Snell was evacuated safely, he might be praised as a hero. If not, he faced a court-martial for disobeying a direct order.

"I held my breath every second that that helicopter was overhead," Major says. "If that helicopter had gotten shot down, we'd probably still be there today. It would've gotten nasty."

Because every second over the forest exposed the chopper to enemy fire, the pilot took off with Snell dangling in the stretcher at least 50 feet below. "I just watched as it turned around and around, getting higher and further away." Dougherty recalls. *What else is going to go wrong?*, he thought. *How many more of us are going to get it before this operation is over?*

As the chopper flew, the litter spun in one direction, then another. Snell thought, *Well, at least I'm going home, but I hope I don't get shot while I'm spinning around in this thing.*

Luckily, the helicopter received no enemy fire. The chopper stopped briefly at the battalion command post so that Snell could be put inside the aircraft. Even though Snell felt some sense of relief, his ordeal was far from over. There was a very real possibility that he

could bleed to death before reaching the hospital at Dong Ha. He was not about to let that happen. Despite the compression bandages and hemostat, blood flowed everywhere. Since there was no corpsman in the chopper to help Snell stop the bleeding, he decided to try to stem the flow himself. He could feel where the torn artery was pulsing and pumping out blood. With his thumbs, he pushed down hard on his groin above the wound. “Arteries and veins have to be mashed against a bone to slow down bleeding”, he says. As he pressed, the tide of blood began to slow.

Not only were his efforts saving his life, they were occupying his mind. “The mashing gave me something to do,” he says. “As long as I was focused on something, it seemed to make the time go by faster. It made it all a little less spooky.”

Snell felt bitter cold as he continued to fall into shock. He started to shiver. A machine gunner covered him with a blanket. As the chopper carried him across the sky, Snell winced in pain with every agonizing bump.

Across the River

As the helicopter took off with Dan Snell dangling beneath it, Major thought, *I hope he makes it.* Then he turned to Thompson and said, “Gunny, let’s get going on this.”

For a moment he wrestled with how to get his company across the river. Since he had been relieved of his command, a lieutenant should have been next in line to take charge, but all three Charlie Company lieutenants were out of action. Gunny Thompson was next in line. Major decided that under the circumstances – with night falling, enemy forces nearby and the rest of battalion across the stream – he should be the one to lead the men out of the precarious situation.

The threat of an NVA attack was constant. The Americans were especially vulnerable when crossing the river. The men had to maintain a defense and move the Marines across at the same time.

Major started pulling some Marines out of the perimeter to cross the river, leaving small gaps. The men on the perimeter would then pull back, making the perimeter smaller and smaller. The Americans crossed the stream as fast as possible then set up a defense on the opposite bank.

The river crossing was hazardous. Charlie Company began

Operation Medina with approximately 187 men, including attachments. It was now down to about 100. Those men had to make it across, but the tree bridge could accommodate only three at a time. The trunks were no more than a foot or two in diameter, and they swayed with the current. As the men walked across, the trunks tended to sink. The trees could give way at any time, sending any unfortunate American into the river.

Major posted men downstream in case somebody got swept away. If a Marine fell into the river, he was in trouble because his gear would weigh him down and he would probably drown without help.

The men's luck held out. As darkness fell, the last man crossed the river. No American fell and the North Vietnamese did not attack. The entire company made it across safely. A battalion officer met Major and guided Charlie Company back to the battalion command post.

Dan Snell: Landing at Dong Ha

At Dong Ha, Dan Snell was taken into a metal building, a mobile field hospital similar to a MASH unit. As the medical staff began to unwrap his bandages, they came across a large piece of bloody metal in his trousers. Immediately everyone but the doctor left the room, thinking Snell had unexploded ordnance in his body. Snell informed the doctor that the metal was an M-26 fragmentation grenade. He had put the grenade in his pocket at the beginning of Operation Medina. The medical staff returned, trimmed the fabric around the grenade, put it in a metal pan, and carried it outside.

The doctor examined his leg and said the shattered bone had torn a hole in Snell's femoral artery, an injury that is usually fatal because it causes such rapid bleeding. A combination of factors had saved Snell's life: Doc Hammergren's compression bandages and hemostat, the way the bones and tissue had swelled together, Snell's "mashing" the area above the wound with his thumbs to slow the bleeding, and the quick arrival of the medevac chopper.

The doctor said that there was a 50-50 chance the leg could be saved. The necessary surgery couldn't be performed at a field hospital, so Snell was transported to the USS Repose (AH-16), a hospital ship stationed in the South China Sea. There, he underwent surgery.

After surgery, when Snell woke up in the ship's hospital ward, he was in a plaster body cast from the chest down. He raised his head

and looked down to see if he had both legs. He pulled back the sheets and saw a left big toe and a right big toe. “That was good news to me,” he says. “If I had my big toe, I still had my leg.”

A large piece of metal was taped to the top of the cast. It was shrapnel that the doctors had removed from his leg. “I still have that shrapnel with my Purple Heart,” he says. “It is my war souvenir.”

As Snell lay immobile in a body cast, he felt lucky. Not only did he have his leg, he had his life. “When I think of the tens of thousands of Americans over the years who lay wounded on a battlefield and died, I realize how lucky I was.”

Return to LZ Dove

After the perilous river crossing, Captain Major and Charlie Company finally made it back to the battalion command post. It was now dark. The skipper reported to his commanding officer.

“Why did you disobey my direct order?” Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti asked Captain Major.

“If I hadn’t, I would have lost that Marine,” Major replied. “Yes, I understood your order. Yes, I disobeyed your order. Under the circumstances, I would do it again if I had to.”

The Lieutenant Colonel paused. “Well, this isn’t the time or place to talk about it.” he replied. “We’ll talk about it again later. Go back and take command of your company.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Major turned and left. He was once again in command of Charlie Company.

Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti does not recall the medevac incident involving Dan Snell. He does not remember giving Captain Major a direct order not to call in a medevac for the wounded Marine. “It doesn’t make sense,” he says. “If it was clear to me that it was a life or death situation, we would have tried.”

Belbusti also does not recall relieving Captain Major of command. “If I had relieved him, I certainly would not have reinstated him,” he says. “That would have been against my nature.”

By the time the balance of Charlie Company arrived at the LZ, darkness had fallen. It was too late for the company to be helo-lifted out. The men were ordered to set up a defensive perimeter and dig in for the night. Although an enemy attack was always a possibility, artillery and Spooky were on call to protect the company overnight.

At daybreak, the company was moved to another LZ site. As they

waited, someone noticed movement in the bushes along the hillside. The North Vietnamese were looking to hit the men again.

"We could see a whole line of bushes moving," Yates recalls. This time, the Americans were ready for them. Four Huey Cobra gunships were quickly called in. The aircraft fired a torrent of steel into the ridgeline where the movement had been seen.

No additional movement was observed.

Return to Site X

Upon their return to LZ Dove, the men still had to make it back to Site X, which was several miles away. The lucky ones where taken out by helicopter. Others had to walk.

"It was the longest road of my life," George Hutchings recalls. "We were at the end of a road to hell and did an about face. The walk out was more than hot. The way was more than painful. We had torn shoulder blades due to carrying M79 rounds and extra belts of M60 ammo. We had the stench of blood hanging in our nostrils. We had the shocking memory of dead friends who, just a day or two before, were very much alive."

Consuming river water had taken its toll on Mark Anderson. As he walked out, he was plagued by diarrhea. As he struggled with his condition, fatigue and the heat, he watched as the men in front of him sought relief from their heavy loads. "Guys ahead of me in the column started throwing away stuff to lighten their loads," he says. "This included hand grenades, e-tools, all kind of stuff." Anderson and the men near him were ordered to pick up the discarded equipment and pass it back to their original owners.

After a full day's march, all of the men were finally back at Site X. When the Marines arrived, the Seabees opened up their mess hall and showers for the tired, ragged men.

A few days after their return, Captain Major held a memorial service for the men who had been killed. "It was the only time I saw the Captain cry," Zorn recalls. "Tears streamed down his cheeks."

For Charlie Company, Operation Medina was over.

Captain Major (far right) gives Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti (second from right) his assessment of the battle that occurred on the night of 12 October and early morning of 13 October 1967.

13 The Aftermath

The American objective on Operation Medina was to locate and annihilate any enemy forces and installations found in the Hai Lang Forest Reserve. Enemy Base Area 101, a staging area for the NVA, was to be destroyed. Was the operation a success?

After the battle of 12 October, the original regimental objectives were abandoned. Enemy Base Area 101 was not destroyed.[4] The North Vietnamese had not been rooted out of the forest. If the operation was a success, then it was only partially successful. It was obvious that the NVA had been located and heavily engaged. Had the NVA been damaged to such a degree that their ability to launch attacks outside of the forest had been crippled? Had Enemy Base Area 101 been neutralized?

At first, it was difficult to determine the effect the battle had on the NVA regiments. “The NVA were good at picking up their casualties after they had been hit,” Jack Ruffer says. “This denied the U.S. intelligence and comported with Vietnamese religious beliefs. It was hard for the Marines to know how much damage we were doing.”

Blood trails and enemy bodies painted a chilling picture: the North Vietnamese had been extremely close to the Marine positions throughout the engagement. The fighting had been extremely heavy. It was estimated that about 90 NVA soldiers were killed. Yet only 44 enemy bodies were found by the Americans.

A clearer picture soon came into view. Some weeks later, one of the enemy regiments that engaged Charlie Company on 12 October was caught in the open near Route 1, which borders the Hai Lang Forest Reserve. This regiment, which was probably the Fifth or Sixth NVA, was decimated by U.S. supporting arms. A North Vietnamese officer captured by the ARVN after the attack was transported to Phu Bai where he was interrogated by a Marine Interrogator-Translator Team. From that officer, it was learned that 177 NVA soldiers were killed on the night of 12-13 October. In terms of numbers killed, the Marines had scored a decisive victory.

The reconnaissance from Operation Medina accomplished one objective: The Marines determined that the enemy was in the Hai Lang National Forest in strength. It was not, however, determined where the enemy was located. “Since we did not make all of the

objectives, I don't know if they determined where the enemy was exactly located other than he was in there in a good-size force," Major says.

After the battles, Operation Medina changed from a large-scale sweep into a search for small groups of North Vietnamese in the nearly impenetrable forest. In subsequent small missions, the First Marines found a number of base camps that had been recently evacuated and captured more than four tons of rice, 16 weapons, and some small arms ammunition.[5]

The operation included one mission two weeks after the 12-13 October battle in which Charlie Company found and destroyed huge caches of food. On that operation, Charlie Company was accompanied by a "chieu hoi," a defector from the NVA, who led the Americans to where the NVA were storing their supplies.

The enemy's efforts to elude the sweeping Marine units resulted in the largest action of the companion Operation Lam Son 138. On the last day of Operation Medina, the morning of 20 October, the 416th NVA Battalion, a subordinate unit of the Fifth NVA Regiment one of the NVA regiments from the Medina battle – collided with an ARVN airborne company. The airborne company held and, after being reinforced, killed 197 North Vietnamese in the day long battle.[6]

If Operation Medina was only partially successful, had anything been learned from the experience? The answer is yes.

The hammer and anvil tactic, which had worked well in the south where the foliage was not nearly as dense, was much less effective within the confines of a triple-canopy jungle. "The tactic was ill conceived," says Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti. "The tactic doesn't work in jungle terrain against an enemy that knows the terrain better than you do. They had a simple solution: they would just slip out sideways and there you are. It looks like to me that the plan was to drive them like a herd of cattle into the blocking force and that was just not going to happen. I don't see how they (commanders at the division level) thought it could possibly work."

Looking back on Operation Medina, Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti learned several personal lessons. "There were a couple of things I wish I had done that I didn't do," he says. "I wish I had resisted the

regimental commander's pressure on making progress through the jungle. He was quite adamant on the radio about why we weren't moving quicker. I just turned around and exerted pressure on the company commander. I wish now that I had absorbed that and let Captain Major work without bothering him so much."

After the initial ambush on 12 October, when Charlie Company got hit again at dusk, the battalion commander believes that he should have acted differently. "I should have gone forward and surveyed the situation when he (Captain Major) got hit that night. Just to see for myself that he didn't have the troops. I should have made an assessment myself that he needed Delta Company."

Belbusti also believes that he should have taken steps to seal off the battlefield in some way. "The enemy had freedom of movement: freedom to move up reinforcements, to move laterally, move in supplies. He had a network of trails that he knew. I didn't do anything about that freedom."

Belbusti believes that he might have been able to limit enemy movement through the use of interdictory artillery fire on their routes of approach. From maps, the battalion commander knew where the trails were. "Had I gotten some artillery fire in the rear areas on trail junctions, it might have sealed off the battlefield a little bit. Maybe they would have broken off their attack once they found out they were cut off by fire. But, being in the heat of the battle is not like reflecting on the situation later."

Many of the men from Medina would go on to see more combat, but nothing would compare with that October firefight on a small forest knoll. "Medina was the closest combat I was in," Mark Anderson says. "I was in 13 major operations. I called in many fire missions. There were bloodier conflicts in Vietnam. I saw a lot more gruesome stuff. I saw more dead Marines at other times. Medina sticks out. I guess because it was my first one. You will never be prepared for something like that."

The battle also stands out in George Boze's memory. "Medina was the most vicious combat of my ten months in Vietnam," he says. "I can remember it like it was yesterday. On many operations we were on the giving end. When you are on the receiving end of getting your ass kicked, you remember it quite well."

"The proudest moment of my life was serving with those guys on Medina," Boze continues. "They stood the line."

Dennis Antal often wonders about the planning behind the operation. “My thoughts on Medina are *What went wrong? How could everything go so wrong?*” He reasons that if Charlie Company encountered such a large force of NVA, military intelligence officials should have known that the NVA were there. “How could they not know that they were there? If they did know, why did they send so few guys out? When I think back on it, another company would have been nice.”

Charlie Company went into Operation Medina with about 187 men, including attachments. 11 men were killed and 75 were wounded. 60 to 65 Marines were medevaced out. 10 to 15, including Captain Major and Gunny Thompson, were walking wounded. About 100 men walked out without physical wounds.

Lieutenant Paul Nelson suffered multiple shrapnel wounds in both legs and buttocks, the stomach, and testicles. Doctors said that removing all the shrapnel would kill him, so they took out only the most significant pieces. After several operations, he spent 45 days on the hospital ship. During that time, his lower leg kept going numb.

“I kept telling the doctor that something was wrong down there,” he says. “The pain was at its worst when I raised the leg and extended the hamstring area. The doctor said that the pain was just my muscles and that I would have to tough it out.”

Nelson couldn’t sleep because of the pain and was becoming irritated with the rough way the doctor would pull at the dressings. He finally told the doctor sharply, “There is something down in that damn leg.” As a result of Nelson’s constant complaints, the doctor decided to X-ray the leg. The X-rays showed that a large piece of shrapnel in Nelson’s hamstring area was pressing against his sciatic nerve. The coarse surgeon had overlooked the damaging piece of metal.

Nelson had another operation to remove the shrapnel the doctor had missed. That surgery deadened the nerves in his left leg. From that day to the present, Nelson has had to wear a leg brace. When he returned to the states, Nelson was sent to Great Lakes Naval Hospital for more surgery before being sent home.

After being wounded in the initial ambush, Ed Krisko was flown to a hospital ship, where he stayed for a week after having his head wound stitched. He was then sent back to Charlie Company. “Nobody was there that I knew,” he says. “So I knew something bad

happened. Then I started gettin' all the stories. I heard all the stories. Oh, man, I wish I'd have been there to help you guys, but I was gone."

After his initial surgery, Dan Snell was transferred from the hospital ship to a hospital located near Da Nang. It was there that he received a visit from his father.

"The meeting with my dad was more traumatic for him than it was for me," he says. Snell told his father all the dramatic events that had transpired on Medina. "I think my dad thought I was in shock when I told him about what happened. I think he thought I was exaggerating a little bit." But his father was glad that his son was alive and going home. Snell was transported back to the States in a C-141 loaded with other wounded men. He would spend the next eighteen months and four days at the Portsmouth Naval Hospital.

His mangled leg required significant repair. "If there had been a little bit more damage, they would have cut it off," he says. "If they amputate your leg, you go home fast."

He had a lot of open wounds that oozed into his body cast. Doctors pumped him full of antibiotics. But he still suffered various setbacks: an infection inside his bone marrow and blood clots in his injured leg. Eventually, the bone in his femur healed enough so that doctors could work to heal the big hole below his knee. He had skin grafts, more surgery, leg braces, and more surgery.

Snell arrived at the hospital in October of 1967 and left in May of 1969. He spent two Christmases and two Thanksgivings there. Despite the long, tedious hospital stay, Snell realized he couldn't feel sorry for himself. One day, while he was lying on a gurney in his ward, he saw a note tacked to the bulletin board. It said, "If you are looking for sympathy, you can find it in the dictionary between 'shit' and 'syphilis.'" He was struck by how appropriate the sign was.

"I thought how different it might had been if I had been hurt in a car wreck and people came up to me and felt sorry for me," he says. "It was very beneficial for me to go to a military hospital where there wasn't anybody to feel sorry for you. All you had to do was look to your left or right and see somebody hurt just as bad as you or worse. There wasn't any time to feel sorry for yourself. That was good, because it let you focus on getting better. You didn't have any time to indulge in self pity."

"If I had gone through Medina and not gotten hurt, I would have

known only about victory and facing my fears," he says. "It was only after I got wounded that I saw the other side of being a warrior. I had to face defeat and loss. Going through my recovery was a more involved, psychological ordeal than Medina ever was. There is a reality that you cannot escape when something lays you low and you have to deal with it the rest of your life. That battle wasn't going to end in fifteen minutes or even tomorrow."

"Being wounded really put me on the warrior's path," he says. "Now I see that a warrior's enemies are not the Viet Cong or the NVA. A warrior's enemy is himself: his fears, his pettiness, and selfishness. All of those little things. Being wounded thrust me on that path. It made me make changes in my psychological profile. You don't usually change who you are because you want to. You change who you are because you have to."

George Boze also spent a long time in the hospital. After being wounded by the concussion grenade during the ambush of the re-supply patrol, he didn't remember anything until he woke up in the Philadelphia Naval Hospital three weeks later.

He tries to frame the incident with a positive outlook: "You try to do the best you can with the circumstances that you have to deal with and the personnel you have with you."

Lieutenant Jack Ruffer got out of the hospital after a brief stay and was promoted to captain on 29 October 1967. He was assigned to the battalion staff as Assistant Operations Officer. The new captain didn't, however, stay in the field long.

"The next time I tried to carry a seventy pound pack on a sweep near Con Thien I had to depend on a corpsman dispensing Darvon to help me with the pain." Ruffer recalls. "When he ran out of Darvon, he reported me to the Battalion Commander. I was on the next medevac to NSA Hospital Da Nang where I stayed for the next six weeks."

Tests showed that Ruffer's lower back muscles and kidneys had been seriously damaged by the grenade that exploded over his back on Medina. He was released from the hospital on 21 December. He then became the commanding officer of H&S Company and retained his other responsibilities as the battalion's assistant operations officer. He was given a week of R&R in Hawaii, where he met with his wife for five days. Upon his return, on 18 January 1968, he was given command of Bravo Company.

Dave Welsh had surgery on his wounded leg at Cam Ranh Bay. The doctors had to use wire stitches to close his wounds because the holes were so gaping that regular stitches would have been ineffective. After several weeks he was released to rejoin his company. He soon found himself in battle again at Con Thien.

Medals

The Marines who fought on Operation Medina didn't fight for accolades, decorations or medals. When it came down to it, they fought for the buddy right next to them. They fought for their fellow Marines.

Medals, however, serve a valuable purpose in the military and in American society as a whole. The award of a medal is an official recognition of a valorous action. It is a symbol to the world of a gallant act performed by one man for his comrades and his country.

The Medal of Honor is our nation's highest decoration for combat valor. Only an act of the most conspicuous gallantry, above and beyond the call of duty, merits the award of this medal. It is reserved solely for the bravest of the brave.

William T. Perkins, Jr., the intrepid combat photographer who fell on the grenade to save his fellow Marines, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor by President Richard M. Nixon.

"Perkins deserved the Medal of Honor," Dennis Antal says. "In my mind, he did the most courageous thing that anyone could do."

For years, Antal avoided the topic of Vietnam. When he finally did talk to family and friends about the war, he didn't tell them the story of Perkins and the grenade.

"Maybe I was ashamed of it," he says. "He died and I didn't. If he hadn't done what he did, I wouldn't be here. Probably both of us wouldn't be here. He was the one who decided that I should be here and he shouldn't be. The grenade didn't go off when it hit the ground. He scooped it up and put it in his belly underneath him. Then it went off. It was very obvious that he gave his life to save ours."

Captain Major recommended Perkins for the Medal of Honor.

He saw to it that all of the bureaucratic paper work was completed to ensure that Perkins received the medal. Major recommended two other Marines for the Navy Cross. The Navy Cross is the Department of the Navy's second highest award for combat valor. Those two men

were Lieutenant Jack Ruffer and helicopter pilot Henry Eisenson.

Due to the vagaries of military bureaucracy, not every gallant act is recognized by a medal. Not every medal recommended is actually awarded.

Along with his Purple Heart, Lieutenant Jack Ruffer received the Silver Star for bravery and extraordinary heroism in combat because of his actions on Operation Medina. The Silver Star is our nation's third highest decoration for combat valor. Henry Eisenson received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his skillful flying under treacherous conditions that ultimately saved the lives of many wounded Marines.

Along with his Purple Heart, Captain Major received the Bronze Star with Combat "V". A Bronze Star is awarded for individual acts of heroism and, on some occasions, for superior performance outside of combat. The combat "V" designates that the medal was awarded for heroism or meritorious service during armed hostilities.

Lieutenant Paul Nelson received a Bronze Star with Combat "V" as a result of the eight months he served as a platoon commander, which included Operation Medina. He also received the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with a Silver Star, awarded by the South Vietnamese as a result of the battle of Medina, and a Purple Heart.

Phil Seymour received a Navy Commendation Medal with a combat "V" for Medina.

Sixty-four wounded Charlie Company men received Purple Hearts as did eleven of those attached to Charlie Company for the operation. The officers on Medina recommended other men for commendations because of the numerous acts of bravery and skill, but not all actions were judged worthy of a medal. The men who were in the battle, however, know the real story.

Phil Hartranft believes all the men of Charlie Company and the attached units should be commended for their deeds. "They held their own with anything the Marine Corps has ever done in its history as far as I'm concerned," he says. "I really think that we all should be dead. When I think about it, I get chills."

Moving On

After Operation Medina, Captain Major was assigned three new lieutenants right out of The Basic School to replace the leaders of Charlie Company's three platoons. A few days after the assignments

were made, a Marine reconnaissance unit was ambushed two or three miles from Charlie Company's position near Site X. The attack came around midnight. Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti ordered Major to stand by in case Charlie was needed to rescue the unit. From his position on the airfield, Major could see the firefight: red and green tracers flew between the two sides.

"Up until that point, I had always volunteered Charlie Company for any operation," Major says. "But I told Colonel Belbusti that I didn't think that was a great idea because I had three brand-new second lieutenants. They had yet to see a shot fired in anger. The men had not been baptized by fire. A night extraction of a reconnaissance team under fire was not a good idea."

As Charlie Company prepared to move out, the enemy broke contact. The recon team was safe and Charlie Company did not have to make the night extraction.

Some of the Marines who survived Operation Medina were killed on subsequent missions. Those men included PFC Lewis Biggers of First Platoon, PFC Vaughn Brown, LCpl Philip Mitchell, and PFC Chesley Story.

PFC Steve Kane spent about a week in a field hospital recovering from the grenade explosion that had punctured his eardrums on Operation Medina. When he returned to Charlie Company, which was still located at Quang Tri, he was placed on light duty. On 23 October, he sought out his friend Mike LaVallee. On 10 October, the two Marines had placed a bet on the outcome of Game Six of the World Series between Boston and St. Louis. The game was played on 11 October. While in the hospital, Kane learned that Boston had defeated St. Louis 8-4 to tie up the series. The Red Sox lost Game Seven, which was played on 12 October, but Kane still won his bet with LaVallee.

When Kane found him, LaVallee was preparing to go out on a routine patrol. "Hey… Boston won. You owe me!" Kane said. "I'll give it to you later," LaVallee answered. "Then he went out on that patrol," Kane says. "I didn't think anything of it."

The patrol returned around five that afternoon. When he saw the Marines, Kane approached the men, thinking: *I'm gonna collect my money.* Kane couldn't, however, find Mike LaVallee. "I looked at one

of the guys and asked: 'Hey, where's LaVallee?'" The man paused. "He bought the farm." was the response. "Ahh… you're kidding me!,"

Kane said. “I just talked to him before he went on the patrol. He owes me two bucks!” By the look on his face, however, Kane could tell that the Marine wasn’t kidding.

LCpl Mike LaVallee of Minneapolis, Minnesota survived the booby trap explosion that killed Lieutenant Vic Kemp and eight others on 15 August. He made it through Operation Medina to be appointed company radioman under Captain Major. On 23 October, eleven days after the battle on the small knoll, LaVallee’s luck ran out. The radioman was always a marked target. On that patrol, LaVallee paused to remove his helmet, wipe away the sweat and cool his head. “It’s pretty hot today,” he said to a fellow Marine. As the words left his mouth, a shot rang out from somewhere deep in the jungle. The bullet struck LaVallee in the head, between the eyes. An enemy sniper had been waiting patiently for an officer or radio operator to present himself as a target. LaVallee was killed instantly.

“That really bothered me,” Kane remembers. “We were good friends. He was a quiet, nice, easy-going guy. They picked him out because he had a radio on his back. I never bet with anyone again while I was in Vietnam.”

Hugh Helm had been on R&R during Operation Medina. He returned to find that his unit was gone. He didn’t recognize anyone in his squad. Because he had only a short time left on his tour, he was given administrative duties. But even in the rear, he couldn’t escape the horrors of war. One of those duties was to travel up Hwy 1 to the field morgue across the LZ from Delta Med in Dong Ha and identify the body of his friend, Mike LaVallee.

After a short two-week stay in the hospital, Dennis Antal received orders to return to Charlie Company. When Antal jumped off the truck at Site X, he asked where Charlie Company was. “Charlie Company’s over there,” a Marine said, motioning toward two bunkers and a tent. Antal asked where his squad was. The Marine had no answer. The squad no longer existed.

“There was Second Platoon and maybe twenty guys left in Charlie Company,” Antal says. “We pulled perimeter watch for about a week. We didn’t do much more than that.”

A few days later, Boxill returned to the company as well. Soon Cole returned, and the entire ABC squad was together again. In addition to those returning to duty, the severely wounded and dead were quickly being replaced with new men.

“We were now the old salts. We didn’t recognize a whole lot of people,” Cole says.

When Scott Camil got back to his artillery unit, he asked to stay for another tour in Vietnam. The idea of leaving his friends behind disturbed him. “I just felt that it would be cowardice to leave,” he says. “I was really scared and I didn’t want to stay, but I didn’t want to be a coward. It was a lot easier to pretend that I had that kind of courage and ask to stay.”

But Camil’s Battery Commander could tell that Camil’s combat experiences were affecting him. “You don’t belong here,” he said. “It’s time for you to go home, and I’m sending you home.”

Some of the men were sent on R&R to recover from the fierce battle of 12 October. Lewis went to Hawaii. Robinson was sent to Japan, where he had a buddy stationed, for seven days. “It was a great time,” he says. “It allowed me to unwind.” He deliberately avoided talking about Medina, but the military men around him could tell he was shaken from some traumatic incident. “Anytime I heard a *bang*, I was practically on the ground,” he says. When Robinson had one of these reactions, somebody would always say, “It’s all right, Marine.” During his stay, he stopped by a church and thanked God for pulling him through the horrifying battle. “It was nice to be alive,” he says.

Jackson was sent to Hong Kong for six days after being released from the hospital. The first thing he did was take a hot, hot bath. Dave Butt, the sniper who was originally scheduled for Medina but was replaced by Jackson at the last minute, was also in Hong Kong for R&R.

“I think there’s a reason it happened this way,” Butt told him. “I don’t think I would have come back. I don’t think I would have lived.”

About a month after Medina, Charlie Company was called to battle at Con Thien, a muddy, reinforced piece of high ground just below the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Some of the wounded troops returned and replacements had arrived, so the company was getting back up to strength.

Con Thien was a dangerous place. It was a bare hill with bunkers and trench lines surrounded by a huge minefield. It was a constant target for artillery, rockets, and sniper fire, so movement was kept to a minimum. When the men of Charlie went in, they didn’t march in company formation; they entered quietly one squad at a time. This

was called “relief in place,” one squad in and one squad out. The men did this until the whole battalion defending the hill was replaced.

After Medina, the men were aware of what it was like to be a target for the enemy. At Con Thien, the ABC squad found itself in a bunker with a .50 caliber machine gun. They looked at each other and asked, “Who’s responsible for this?” They didn’t want to be near the weapon. They knew that if the enemy stormed their position or if they fired mortar or artillery, the machine gun was a prime target. “We were doing our damndest to have them put it in somebody else’s bunker,” Cole says. “We were also right next to a tank, which was another inviting target.”

Doc Dowd, who was still with the company at Con Thien, also had a heightened awareness of personal security after Medina. He was working to reinforce his bunker with some boxes he was filling with dirt from a large pile. He noticed some extra dirt near the bunker, so instead of dragging another box to the pile, he started to fill a box with the other dirt. Suddenly he heard a *whoosh*. He hit the ground. He saw a black puff of smoke and an explosion behind him. The blast flipped him on his back, his arms and legs waving in the air. He rolled over and crawled into his bunker. Then he realized that he had been hit in the leg with shrapnel from an 82mm mortar that had landed right in the dirt pile he had been working on.

The enemy mortar men had been watching and timing Dowd’s actions, expecting him to return to the pile to fill the next box with dirt.

“Had I drawn the box over to the dirt pile to fill it, as I had each time before, the round would have landed right on me,” Dowd says. “As it was, it landed 20 feet away.”

David Welsh ended his tour at Con Thien and was shipped back to the states at the end of 1967.

After only a few weeks at Con Thien, Captain Major received orders to take over a new NCO (non-commissioned officer) Leadership School that was being formed in Da Nang. “I didn’t want to leave Charlie Company,” he says. “At the same time, it was about time for me to go on an R&R trip anyway. I had seen enough carnage with wounded and dead Marines. It was time for a break. As much as I loved being the company commander, I was just tired.”

After Medina and Con Thien, the survivors of Charlie Company and the new replacements saw battle and lost men on several occasions:

at Hill 881 at Khe Sanh and on Operation Ford. Others fought at Hue City during the Tet Offensive. “It was one bad operation after another,” Antal says.

Combat continued to wear down the surviving men of Charlie Company. One man who had survived Medina just snapped. “We were on Hill 881 near Khe Sanh” Antal recalls. “He was supposed to be engaged to this girl. That’s all he would talk about, his girlfriend.” One day the Marine received a copy of his hometown newspaper. He opened it up and saw an announcement about his girlfriend and best friend back home. The two were engaged to be married. “He just lost it,” Antal says. “He started firing his rifle straight up inside his bunker. We told him to stop and took his rifle away.” The man stormed out of his bunker, talking gibberish. Once outside, he started to strip off his clothes. No one in his right mind would venture outside his bunker on Hill 881. Any Marine who did was a prime target for an NVA mortar. Before he could hurt himself or someone else, the ill Marine was subdued and medevaced out.

As the Marines neared the end of their tours of duty in Vietnam, the stress became enormous. They were anxious to get home, counting the days until their tours ended. With less than a month left on his tour, Antal, now a squad leader, was ordered on a routine patrol just outside of Da Nang. The first night out, Antal and his men started taking heavy mortar fire. “I need out of here,” he told the other Marines. “I have to get out of here. I’m too short. I’m not going to make it.”

After fighting in Hue City and on Hill 881, with a few months left on his tour, Cole was sent to a tank battalion as a repairman. He was reunited with Antal in the last few months of their tours, and they headed back to the States together after a few days in Okinawa.

In March of ’68, George Hutchings was wounded when his unit was ambushed. Shot in the hip three times, he was sent back to the States, where he spent a year in a body cast.

Glenn Griffin of Delta made it back to the States safely, but his best friend Woody, the man with whom he prepared dinner with on Operation Medina, did not. Jon Woodard was killed at Khe Sanh.

With less than a month left on his tour, Lewis was assigned to a platoon that swept Highway 9 in relief of Khe Sanh. He couldn’t wait to receive orders to return home. He kept asking the lieutenant, “Has anybody called? Has anybody called?”

“The shorter I got, the thicker my bunker got,” he says. Lewis came back home in May of 1968.

Steve Kane also left Vietnam that month. As he and the other departing Marines waited to board the plane at Da Nang, they watched as a new group of Marines fresh from the U.S. disembarked. The new arrivals were laughing and joking with each other. When the new men caught sight of the somber, unsmiling men waiting to board the plane, their mood shifted and they fell silent. Then, Kane and the other salts boarded the aircraft.

As it lifted into the air, the passengers broke into applause.

At about the same time, Wayne Dowd was in a bunker at Khe Sanh on the edge of the medevac LZ. A South Vietnamese officer came to Dowd’s door to tell him that a medevac chopper was about to land. Suddenly, a huge blast went off as an enemy rocket landed right between the officer’s feet.

The force of the blast blew Dowd back into the bunker. He staggered out, nose bleeding and ears ringing. He saw a crater hole in his doorway. The officer was gone.

“It vaporized him,” Dowd says. “The only thing that was left of him was the lower part of one leg in a boot hanging on a piece of com wire about 30 feet over my head.”

Dowd was medevaced out with a concussion. Since that was his third Purple Heart, he was sent home.

Combat correspondent Hartranft covered the siege of Khe Sanh, but nothing matched the night in the jungle on Operation Medina. “It was a different setting because Khe Sanh was a big base. We were shelled real heavy up there, but we had bunkers. We just had to wait out the enemy or wait until someone came and got us. At Khe Sanh, we had a lot of firepower with us, which was something Charlie Company didn’t have on Medina. The only thing Charlie Company had that night was guts, and they sure had a lot of them.”

Despite the horrors of Medina, Doc Hammergren signed up for another tour in Vietnam. He was allowed to go home on leave in July of ’68. He was now 20. In Missouri that meant he wasn’t old enough to drink, and he got arrested for drinking a beer. “I didn’t know I was a minor,” he said. “I thought I was a soldier.”

When Hammergren explained his situation to the authorities, they dropped the charges. Despite the negative incident, Hammergren enjoyed his leave – so much so that he didn’t want to return to

Vietnam. He tried to think of ways to get out of his additional commitment. He told his father what he was thinking. “My father, he didn’t say don’t do it,” he says. “He told me it’s easier to do the wrong thing than the right. And right then I knew I had to go back.”

The Families Back Home

Within days after Medina, the families of Marines began to receive news about their loved ones.

Pat Ruffer had taken her oldest daughter, Terri, age 5, to the Commissary to do some grocery shopping. As she pulled in the driveway back home, Pat’s mother rushed to the car and said, “Patty, there was an officer and an enlisted man just here.”

“That’s all I heard, and I just lost it,” Pat says. She thought her husband had been killed. Her mother tried to reassure her that Jack was okay but had been seriously wounded. Terri started crying, “My daddy’s dead! My daddy’s dead!” Pat was crying and trying to comfort her daughter at the same time. Eventually, the Marines returned with a telegram and said someone would be getting in touch with her soon. After a week or so, she received a letter from Jack.

But for many families, the news was far worse.

Dennis Lee was in history class at Cottage Grove High School, Cottage Grove, Oregon, when he heard a voice over the loudspeaker asking him to report to the principal’s office.

“When I got in there, when I saw the two Marines, I knew what it was,” he says. The Marines rounded up John Lee’s two other brothers from their classrooms and took them home to be with their parents. John’s father, a head sawyer at the local sawmill, and his mother, who worked at a poultry plant, had already been notified.

Brad Foote accompanied John Lee’s body home to Oregon. At the funeral, he handed Lee’s parents the flag that had draped their son’s coffin. By that time, Foote had only eight days left on his tour. His original plan had been to leave the Corps, go to college, and build an A-frame on the land he bought with Lee. Instead, he signed up for another 13 months. The young Marine was seething to avenge his friend’s death. “I was gonna kill every one of them,” he says. “But I was still a kid, remember. I was only 20 years old.” Several weeks into his new tour, Foote realized he had made a mistake but stuck with it to the end. Foote had turned 18 in Okinawa heading into Vietnam and turned 21 during his passage out.

John Lee, who had never met with war protesters in life, was hounded by them in death. After the Lee family buried John in Cottage Grove Cemetery, about a dozen protesters in hippie garb demonstrated at his gravesite, trying to get on the evening news. The protesters were using the fact that a local man had been killed in Vietnam to bolster their message, saying that Lee died for a worthless cause. The Lee family was enraged.

"My dad and my brothers and I went up there and told 'em they better get the hell off of there and never come back," Dennis Lee says. Some were his high school classmates. "I wanted to knock 'em into the next Zip code. John never did anything to them. He fought for what he was taught was right. He thought he was helping the country, and here they go and try to use him for their cause."

The protesters left, and Dennis confronted a couple of the young men the next day at school. They backed down, knowing they had crossed the line. He had no more problems with classmates, but he did have a teacher who was staunchly anti-war. She knew Lee's brother had died and that Dennis patriotically supported Americans serving in Vietnam. She refused to give him a passing grade.

Early on the morning of 19 October, Cecilia Bazulto heard a knock on her door. She opened it to find a Marine major in uniform. She knew right then that her husband was either injured or dead. After asking to see a letter from her husband bearing his military ID number, the Marine told Cecilia and her mother that Salvador had died on 12 October. Cecilia screamed and started to cry.

"It was just the worst feeling," Cecilia says. "I just couldn't believe it. I went to church every Sunday and said the rosary every day and just prayed for his safety, to come home, and it just didn't happen."

She was told that his body was not viewable because he had sustained multiple gunshot wounds to the head. She chose not to view Salvador because she was pregnant and didn't want her emotions to put her unborn child at risk. Instead, she chose to remember him as he was on that warm August day, waving to her as he drove from sight.

Two weeks after Cecilia was notified of his death, on a dreary overcast day, Salvador Bazulto was given a military funeral at Calvary Cemetery in East Los Angeles. "I just felt like my soul was torn out from me," Cecilia says. "It was just the most awful feeling of loneliness."

Gerald Brothers' sister Pauline was making cookies and fruitcake to send to her brother when the Marine officers came knocking at her door. She and her husband, John Befumo, were expecting a baby who would be both a stepbrother and nephew for Gerald. The couple who had fought to keep Gerald out of the service were told the news they had dreaded: he had been killed in battle. He had been in Vietnam three weeks.

Shortly after losing her brother, Pauline also lost the baby she was carrying.

Betty Bice was still in her nightclothes the morning the uniformed Marines knocked on the door. Her husband had gone to take the three girls to school, leaving Betty with their 4-year-old son Terry. She went numb when she heard the news, thinking, *It can't be true. Not my son.* Carolyn Bice and her sisters were rounded up by a neighbor and driven home. As she got out of the car, her little brother ran up shouting, "Guess what! Morgan's dead." The child didn't understand the tragic news he carried to his sisters. Carolyn fainted and fell to the ground.

Bill Perkins had finally sent a letter to his parents admitting that he was in Vietnam. His father, Bill Perkins Sr., barely had time to digest that news when he got a call at work from his wife, who said a Marine captain was coming over to the house. The news was "a horrible shock," Perkins Sr. remembers. Learning the heroic circumstances of his son's death created mixed emotions for the Marine's father. "I wish to hell he hadn't done it," he says. "Of course naturally I was very proud of him. He had a lot of guts, probably more than I did."

After William Perkins Jr. was awarded the Medal of Honor, his family was invited to the White House in 1969 for a special ceremony in the Rose Garden. The ceremony was especially hard on Marilane Perkins, who was still broken up over her son's death.

After the ceremony, President Nixon invited the family into the Oval Office. Bill Perkins Sr. got to chat with the president for a short while, and he noticed Nixon seemed more nervous than the family members. It was clear that the president was trying to be very friendly and compassionate to those who had suffered such a tragic loss.

When they were getting ready to leave, Nixon said, "I want to give you folks something, I don't know what I have to give you – let me

see what I can find." He swiveled his chair around and started rummaging through his credenza. He found his golf balls, so he gave each family member a golf ball with his name on it. Then Nixon offered them a tour of the private quarters of the White House with one of his daughters.

News of the award made the local papers, but the Perkins family found that their heroic son's fame had a negative consequence. They received so much hate mail that Bill Perkins Sr. was forced to contact the Marine Corps to see if anything could be done about it.

One letter was particularly hateful. The letter, addressed to Bill Sr. said, "Your son got his and you're next. You're gonna get yours."

"It's unbelievable that Americans would do that," he says. "It got so bad I wouldn't let my wife go to the mailbox and get the mail."

It took weeks after Perkins' death for the bad news to reach buddy Jim Priddy. Priddy received a letter from his father – an ominous sign, since most letters came from his mother. Jim's father told him that Perkins had been killed. Priddy was filled with shock, surprise, and ultimately anger. He was also frustrated that he couldn't go home to be with Perkins' parents. "That's what I wanted to do. I needed to do that, but I couldn't do it," he says. "I had to go back in the shit and keep doing what I was doing. Keep trying to stay alive."

Priddy had seen other Marines jaded by the combat deaths of friends. "I wasn't a cynic and up until that time I felt no need for revenge," he says. "But when Bill died, all that changed. I became a different type of Marine over there." Priddy also began a drug habit that would take years to control.

He had mixed feelings about his friend's heroic dying act. "It surprised me, shocked me, pissed me off, but I understood totally why he did it," he says. "The Corps instills an instinct to save fellow Marines. We always felt in the Marine Corp that that was part of the duty. It was never above and beyond."

"God, I was proud of him," Priddy adds. "Who knows what was going through his mind at that time. I hope someday, if there's another world, I could say, 'Bill, what did you do that for?' I'm sure he'd say, 'Hey, I had no choice.' And I'm sure if you asked any of the Marines who were with him, they'll tell you the exact same thing."

Priddy takes some comfort in the fact that Perkins controlled the circumstances of his death. "Most deaths in combat, it's not your decision to die that way. You're just trying to live out the day, or live

out that minute, which seems like hours at the time. But Bill chose and knew that *I'm choosing to die right now. I'm choosing to save my fellow Marines.*"

In October, the family of John Castillo had a bad feeling. In the weeks he had been stationed in Vietnam, his parents and four siblings were accustomed to getting a letter every week. But then one week passed without news. Then another.

On the night of 12 October, his dog Charlie began to howl. The dog had never howled before, so John's parents checked outdoors for an intruder. No one was there. They tried to comfort the dog, but it continued to howl.

"We couldn't get that dog to quiet down,' says Castillo's sister, Margaret Castanon.

Not long after that strange night, Marines carrying the news of Castillo's death approached his parents' house. His mother saw them, and for a moment, didn't want to let them in. Maybe her son would be all right if she kept the men from her home. But they delivered the news. Castillo's sister Theresa, who lived upstairs with her husband, heard her mother scream. She went downstairs to see what had happened and called Margaret.

Castanon, a surgical technician, was assisting with surgery when the nun who was her supervisor came into the operating room and touched her arm. Castanon looked at her and said, "Sister, you've contaminated me." She said this because everything in the operating room needed to remain sterile.

The nun said that Margaret needed to go home right away. Castanon knew immediately that her brother was dead. He had been in Vietnam for only two months.

When the news reached Florida that Oliver Bell had been killed, his family was devastated. At the same time, they were proud of his service. "He liked the idea of being able to serve," remembers his uncle, Thomas Snell. "Even before he joined the service, he always wanted to be helpful to people who were around him … he wanted to help people. And he was so proud when he was able to go into the Marine Corp and have his uniform on."

Stan Blessing's sister Kelly refused to accept the news at first. Her grandmother came to her door saying that some Marines had just visited her parents with news of her brother's death. Kelly just stared at her grandmother thinking, *That can't be. You're wrong.* But her

grandmother was right.

The family had to wait for two weeks for Stan's body to arrive. His remains were deemed un-viewable; his father was allowed only to see his foot. The memorial service was held in a small church where Stan's father was the pastor. A crowd of friends waited outside the church during the service, and a long line of cars wound from the church to the cemetery. Stan's grandfather, also a minister, performed the service. "Greater love hath no man than this," the elder Blessing said, "that a man lay down his life for his friends." "Taps" was played, followed by a 21 gun salute. "To this day, I cannot hear 'Taps' without

tears, without pain," says sister Kristi. Stan Blessing was buried at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver.

LCpl Mike Robinson on the plane home from Vietnam, June, 1968.

14 Back in the USA

The Marines and Navy corpsmen of Charlie Company returned to the States at different times, but they all faced the same difficult readjustment. Not only had they changed from their time in Vietnam, but their country had also changed while they were away.

Bill Major flew on a commercial flight into Los Angeles. He had kept his promise to himself and quit smoking cold turkey. While he waited for his connecting flight to Newark, New Jersey, he went to a bar and ordered a drink. He was still wearing his uniform.

"I was carded," he says. "I couldn't believe it after serving a year in country in Vietnam. I couldn't believe that someone would have the gall to ask me for proof of age." When he got to Newark, he walked down the ramp from the plane on a bright sunny day to see his wife, daughter, and son waiting for him.

"The reunion made everything worthwhile," he says. "Thirteen months out of your life fighting in a country that you had never seen before." When he got home, he was greeted with a giant banner strung across the house that said, "Welcome Home Captain Bill."

Scott Camil returned to the States with two more years left in the Marine Corps, which helped him make the adjustment. "If I had gone right back to civilian life, I probably would have gone to jail for doing something that is not acceptable over here," he says.

The anti-war sentiment had grown strong, and it was hard for the returning Marines to face.

"My initial view of war protesters was that they were cowards, Commie sympathizers and unwilling to serve their country," Camil says. "When I was in Vietnam, I remember Joan Baez having blood drives and sending blood to North Vietnam. I remember thinking that I could get killed by some Commie with American blood in him. That really pissed me off."

Mark Anderson was headed home on a commercial flight out of LA, wearing his Summer Service "A" uniform complete with ribbons. An attractive young woman sat down next to him. He thought, *Oh man, I'm back!* They started talking, and he told her he just got back from Vietnam. She asked, "Oh, are you in the Army?"

"No, I'm in the United States Marine Corps," he replied. She reached her hand up and buzzed for the flight attendant. When the stewardess came, the woman said, "I'm not sitting next to this guy. I

want another seat."

"She took a seat next to this hippy guy with bell bottoms on," Anderson remembers. "I couldn't believe it."

Then, an older man behind Anderson tapped him on the shoulder and asked if he could buy Anderson a drink. "He was a retired railroad worker who had been visiting his family in California. He bought me drinks all the way back to Chicago."

A similar snub was given to Joe Zorn. He was on a plane flying from Los Angeles to New York. He was in his Marine Winter Service "A" uniform. A young woman had the seat next to him. "Did you just get back from Vietnam?" the woman asked. "Yea," Zorn replied. The woman got up and moved to another seat. When he got home, all Zorn wanted to do was spend time with his family and close friends.

Wayne Dowd returned home on 6 June 1968, the day Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. His mother hadn't received word that he had been wounded a third time and was coming home. When he called her from the airport in Stockton, California and explained what had happened, she was overwhelmed with emotion. "She came screaming into the airport twenty minutes later," he says. "That was the only time in her whole life that she drove over the speed limit. I remember the look on her face when she came through the main doors at the airport. She was clutching her purse. Frantic is the only word to describe the look on her face. She just wanted to see that I was in one piece. I knew I was home at that point."

The summer of 1968 was marked by race riots and war protests. "I came home thinking *Why did I bother to do this?* The guys in Vietnam, in Charlie Company, had become my world," Dowd says. "They had become my reality. The States had changed so much that I felt like I didn't fit in any more. When people found out that you were a vet, you were automatically a baby killer or a doper."

R.J. Jackson returned 4 April 1968, the day Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed. He rode from the airport with two black Marines who were in disbelief that after fighting the Vietnamese, they would come home to racial hatred. Jackson also saw his first mini-skirt that day and realized the country had changed in many ways while he was gone.

At first, Jackson's return to his hometown was pleasant. It wasn't long, however, before he encountered difficulty. He was involved in a discussion with his church group when a friend he had known since

kindergarten asked: “What did it feel like to kill those people over there?” The comment was made in front of the group and was meant to embarrass him.

Jackson was shocked. He managed to say, “Someone had to do it. If I didn’t, then someone else would. Why am I better than anyone else?”

R.J. decided to go back to school. During his first week at Pasadena City College, he encountered his first war protests. The

demonstrators called American troops “Baby Killers.” With his blonde hair, blue eyes, and youthful appearance, he blended in with the other students. He just made sure not to wear anything that looked military.

Joe Zorn endured constant taunts of “Baby Killer” and “War Monger.” Since he was still in the Corps, he wore the distinctive Marine “high and tight” haircut. When he was at home on leave, dressed in civilian clothes, he wore a baseball cap to cover his hair. The hat helped him avoid at least some insults.

Zorn also recalls the cool reception given to Vietnam vets by some veterans of WWII and the Korean War. “You were the only guys who lost a war for this country,” he was told.

“We were just fighting to keep ourselves alive,” Zorn says. “After three or four months in country, we figured out that we weren’t going to win this war. We fought for each other and hoped we would get back to ‘the world.’”

Like Jackson, George Hutchings also met with problems in college. After getting out of the hospital, he married and moved from job to job, not knowing what to do with his life. Even though he was full of bitterness from his experiences, he was also deeply influenced by the death of Morgan Bice, who had always spoken of his relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of Bice, Hutchings would attend church with his wife. One night, after visiting with the pastor of his church, Hutchings realized that his calling was the ministry. He enrolled in Missouri Baptist University.

At first Hutchings struggled. “All I knew how to do was fire an M16 and cuss. English 101 didn’t have anything to do with either one of those,” he says.

He also had to face the barbs of classmates who knew he was a veteran. The students would taunt him with their views on the war. Hutchings tried to put on the face of a minister and quietly ignore his

classmates, but finally his Marine background got the better of him. One day two of his biggest harassers said something particularly embarrassing about him during class, drawing the entire class's attention to him. After class, as the two young men continued to try to make a fool of Hutchings, he picked up one of them and threw him across the room. "I want you to know something," Hutchings said. "I'm still a Marine. You ever say anything to embarrass me again, I'm gonna drive this fist right through your head." He turned to the other one and said, "That goes for you, too."

The two never bothered Hutchings again. He eventually graduated and went on to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and became a minister.

After spending six months at the amphibious warfare school in Quantico, Virginia, Bill Major was assigned to the United States Naval Academy, where he taught international and military law. In his second year, he was appointed company officer of a company of Navy midshipmen. Each year, one company at the Naval Academy stands out among its peers as the best in overall performance. That company earns the title of "Color Company" and is selected based on its performance in academics, professional skills and athletics. In 1969, Bill Major's company at the Naval Academy earned the title of "Color Company."

As one of their rewards, the color company would attend away Navy football games. The company would represent the Academy at other colleges. One weekend, the Midshipmen played Boston College. Major took the company to Boston for the football game. After the game, he had dinner with a Marine friend. The two men decided to go downtown to make sure that all of the midshipmen were staying out of trouble at the local bars.

The first bar they stopped at was crowded. As Major stepped in, a beer bottle came flying across the room and smashed against the wall next to him. The bouncer came up to him and said, "I'm sorry. You're in uniform. We don't serve men in uniform."

"You're kidding me," Major said.

The bouncer replied, "No, you're going to have to leave."

"I was really pissed," Major says. "I had just served my country. We had men and women over in Vietnam right then getting killed for their freedom and they're not going to serve us?"

They left that bar and tried another one six or seven doors down.

Major walked into the crowded bar first. A young college-age woman walked up to the officer. Captain Major had joined the Marine Corps to fight for his country. He had survived Vietnam, but had seen many friends killed. He had to shoulder the responsibility for the young men in his company, many of whom died under his command. He had faced death himself, but he was lucky enough to come back home.

The young woman spit in his face.

Another bouncer showed up: “We don’t serve armed forces people in here.”

“We’re in uniform,” Major said.

The man replied, “That’s right, you in particular. Leave.”

The two Marines were kicked out of two Boston bars within ten minutes.

Major found out, however, that the anti-military sentiment was not universal. The following week, Navy played the University of Pittsburgh in downtown Pittsburgh. This time, the color battalion (six companies) attended the game, not just the color company.

After the game, the seven officers of the battalion went to a nice restaurant and ordered steak dinners. Drinks began showing up at their table: bottles of wine and other beverages. One of the battalion officers said, “We’ve got to get out of here. We can’t drink all of this stuff. We don’t want to insult them.” The officers thanked the bar patrons and tried to buy reciprocal rounds, but nobody would accept them. When the officers tried to pay for their dinners, they found out that their meals had already been paid for.

From there, the uniformed officers went to check on the midshipmen at one of the local bars. “We found out quickly that we couldn’t stay in a bar more than a half hour because there were so many rounds put in front of us that we couldn’t drink them all,” Major says. “Nobody would let us reciprocate. We didn’t buy one round the whole night.” The city of Pittsburgh welcomed the men of the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Navy with open arms.

Paul Nelson also experienced a wide range of attitudes when he returned home: “The protesters really disliked veterans. They tried to make you look like a dolt for going. It was a bitter thing. Other people thanked us.” Still others would come up to Marines and say that the war was a mistake that should never have happened. “You didn’t want to hear that, especially after you lost guys,” Nelson says.

Because of his injuries, Nelson wore a heavy steel brace that was built into his shoe. One day as he was limping along, an older black gentleman, about 50 years old, asked about his leg. When Nelson said that he had been wounded in Vietnam, the man stopped suddenly and said, “We thank you for what you did for us.”

Nelson was only 25 at the time. “Just the way he said it has stayed with me all this time,” he says. “What he said was very heartfelt and very sincere. A few of those go a long way. You can tolerate a lot of protesters if you get a few of those.”

Dennis Antal was barely off the plane when he saw his first anti-war protesters with their signs: “Stop the War!” “Baby Killers!” But no one put their signs in his face or confronted him.

Brad Foote didn’t have signs thrust into his face either, but he did have to dodge some tomatoes thrown at him when he landed in the United States. He thought *Wait a minute. I just got home. I’m American, too.*

Doc Hammergren, who returned to the States in 1969, got a more violent greeting. When he landed in San Francisco, protesters were throwing rocks and bottles at the returning Marines and Navy corpsmen. When a bottle came in his direction, Hammergren instinctively drew his hand toward his pistol, which was no longer at his side. His self-defense reflexes were still in high gear. He saw more protesters when he landed in Kansas City on his way home.

Rod Lewis had a hard time containing his anger at the protesters he encountered when he returned to school at Portland State. “I couldn’t let anybody know that I had been to Vietnam,” he says. “They probably would have spit on me. There was all of this hatred around me at Portland State. That’s what is so nice about seeing the kids come home from Afghanistan and Iraq. They are treated as heroes.”

When Dan Snell finally got out of the hospital, he took a bus from Virginia to North Carolina. When the bus stopped in a small town, a young woman got on the bus, saw his crutches, and asked what had happened to him. When he explained, she said, “I think you got exactly what you deserve.”

“As I look back on it, I did get what I deserved,” he says. “We all got what we deserved. It reminded me of the Clint Eastwood movie *High Plains Drifter*. In it, some young kid had killed his first man. He was feeling bad about it. The kid kept asking Clint Eastwood, ‘Well, he

deserved it, didn't he?' Clint Eastwood said, 'Yea kid, he deserved it.' We all deserved it. I felt that if you go around and try to kill people, they're going to try to kill you. In one sense, I did get what I deserved. But I never understood why that woman needed to tell me that."

Snell fully understands the lucky series of events that saved his life in the risky helicopter evacuation over the thick forest. "Fortunately, the helicopter wasn't shot down. They came in, lowered the litter and for a moment turned on their landing lights. For a moment, they were one of the biggest sitting ducks in Vietnam. All those guys came together and took a chance. I am very grateful for it."

Jack Ruffer landed at Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino and jumped in a cab, knowing he was only minutes from a joyful reunion with his wife and kids. When he arrived at the house, his two daughters and son, ranging in age from 2 ½ to almost 6, hugged and touched him constantly to reassure themselves that he was really there. They clung to him until bedtime.

He readjusted quickly to his role as father and husband and within a month reported to his new duty station at MCRD San Diego, where he would serve as a recruit company commander, Operations Officer for the First Recruit Training Battalion, and Director of the Drill Instructor School.

Denis Antal was afraid to face his family. They were so angry about his decision to go to Vietnam that they didn't see him off at the airport when he left. "I didn't know it at the time, but their anger was how they coped with and accepted my decision," he says.

When he arrived at the airport, his parents and sister were there to welcome him back home. His mother started crying, so he gave her a big hug. Soon everybody was hugging him. On the ride home, his family peppered him with questions. "I couldn't answer them all. I couldn't really talk. I was amazed at all the lights that night. I remember asking my dad, 'Is it always this bright here?' They didn't know what I was talking about."

He stayed in the Marine Corps another four months. For years he never talked about Vietnam or told any stories. "I just blocked it out and put it out of my mind."

Antal's family had greeted him warmly, but for some of the Marines, readjusting to civilian life meant dealing with family members who couldn't relate to the hardened young men who

returned from the war. When Mark Anderson arrived in Chicago, it was just after the riots at the Democratic National Convention that had been held in the city. There was no transit from O'Hare Airport to the far south side where he lived, so he walked to the outer curb and stuck out his thumb for a ride. No one would pick him up.

Hours passed, and then a car screeched to a stop and the owner opened the passenger door. The driver was a man Anderson had gone to school with. "He didn't recognize me at first," Anderson says. "He just saw a Marine. He picked me up and gave me a ride right to my door. Knowing the size of Chicago, it was weird being picked up by a guy I went to high school with."

It wasn't long before Anderson was ostracized by friends and family. "I was called a murderer during my first meal at home," he says. "I had just gone through all this crap and I was lucky to be alive." Anderson, who had been trained for combat, wasn't trained for readjusting to family life. He quickly lost his temper and said, "Fuck you people. All this time, I couldn't choose who I ate with. I can now." He got up and left the room. His mother followed, upset that he had used foul language and that he had left the dinner table. He told his mother, "I'll just cut my leave short by 29 days. I don't give a shit."

Anderson's homecoming left a bitter impression. "When I joined, I had every intention of making the military a career. Because of the response I got when I got back, I'm not sure if I'd fight for this country now. I'd fight for the Marine Corps. I would fight for my buddies."

Dave Welsh was also shunned at home and had a hard time fitting in. "I was ready to go back to Vietnam after being in the States for a while," he says. "I was treated differently. We were in an unpopular war. We were one of the first groups who never got a ticker tape parade in New York. We weren't treated as heroes. We were treated like misfits. Many of us will go to our graves still feeling unwelcome and unappreciated, even after all these years."

When he landed in LA, a Marine colonel gave Ron Coss and the men he was with a somewhat different warning about the adjustment to life back home. "I wanna tell you something," the colonel said. "You're gonna go home, and grandma, and Aunt Ginny and your mother and sister and your sister-in-law are all gonna want to cook for you, and guess what? You can't eat." The colonel explained that

13 months of C-Rations had shrunk their stomachs. The colonel also warned them about their language. Coss, eager to get home, only half listened. Soon he was at his grandmother's house, seated around a table for a big meal with his parents and sisters.

"Pass the fuckin' butter," he said without thinking.

The room fell silent. Finally, his grandmother looked up and said, "I don't think I heard anything, did anyone else?"

Nobody said a word.

"Let's eat," his grandmother said.

Although his mother was glad to see her son and proud of his accomplishments, George Boze's father was still indifferent to his son's military service. "I got more medals from bar room fighting than you did in Vietnam," his father said.

Steve Kane didn't see many protesters or meet with negative comments from family members. Instead, any time he or his family would mention his service in Vietnam to others, the room would go quiet. No one wanted to talk about it. He quickly learned not to bring up the subject.

Despite their physical and emotional wounds, the men tried their best to start new lives. All Scott Camil wanted to do was return to civilian life and get a job. He interviewed to be a Miami police officer. He took a lie detector test and answered honestly that he had killed people and destroyed property, all within the context of Vietnam. Those details didn't bother the police personnel. They said they couldn't hire him because he admitted to using marijuana in the United States. "This started me on a negative line with the government," he says.

Camil eventually graduated from the University of Florida with a degree in philosophy, which changed his perspective. He joined the anti-war movement and was a founder of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. The Marine who had once despised all war protesters was now one himself. He was one of the "Gainesville 8" a group of protesters indicted for planning to violently disrupt the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami. The group was later acquitted in federal court. "I went from a 100-percent flag-waving right-wing person who would do what the government wanted to someone who thinks for himself," he says.

Edward Krisko found work in a steel mill and wouldn't tell anyone he had fought in the war. His coworkers, however, found out about

his service in Vietnam.

"I was like the plague. Nobody wanted to talk to me," he says. He tried attending college but repeatedly got into fights with protesters. "I got in more fights out of the service than I did in the service." He eventually dropped out of college and rarely spoke again about his tour in Vietnam. Even his family, conflicted about the war, treated him poorly. It would be three years before he received an apology from them.

Scott Thorne discovered that at first, he was his own worst enemy. When he was dropped off in the front yard of his former home in the farm town where he and his nine siblings had been raised, his little brother saw him and went running inside to tell his mother. After a happy reunion, the next morning Thorne immediately went to town to buy a car with the money he'd saved up – he had been earning $189 a month and had nothing to spend it on in Vietnam. He promised himself he would be thrifty and buy a modest car. He wanted to have some spending money left over. But then he walked into a Ford dealership and saw a red '68 Mustang.

"I'll take it," he said, handing over all of his hard-earned cash.

By the time his mother had arranged the paperwork for the vehicle purchase and insurance, it was 3:00 in the afternoon. Thorne was drunk and had already put a dent in the car.

The Marines had to learn to leave their Vietnam reflexes behind. The first time Doc Hammergren drove into town at night, he forgot to turn on the headlights. In Vietnam, lights were never used – they would reveal a Marine's location to the enemy. Jack Ruffer also noticed that when he drove in the U.S. for the first couple of weeks, he was on a constant lookout for ambush sites – the narrowing of a road ahead or tall vegetation close to the road that could conceal an enemy squad.

Coss got a job with International Harvester. The sound of a hammer crashing against the rail of a truck would often wreak havoc on his nerves. The reaction never went away. It was something he had to learn to live with.

Robinson had similar reflexes. "Nobody could sneak up behind me without me knowing it," he says. "You didn't want to tap me on the shoulder. That would be bad news. I was very sensitive to different things. I just came off of a fight where I was taking cover from explosions and bullets. I was constantly taking cover. It was what I

did naturally."

The men also had to learn to live with the images of battle. The summer after Operation Medina, Combat Artist Michael Leahy took his family on a beach vacation. His kids frolicked in the water as he and his wife lay on a beach blanket with a cooler and snacks nearby. The scene couldn't have been more peaceful. Leahy swatted a few annoying gnats, then decided to break out some insect repellent from his bag. He opened the bottle and began to rub the lotion on his neck and shoulders. In an instant, his mind was back on Operation Medina. He remembered the clearing littered with dead Marines, the horrible smell of death and another mysterious odor he hadn't been able to place – until now. The odor of the bug repellent, which he had never used before, catapulted his mind back to that October day on that remote jungle knoll.

The End of the War

As the years passed, the war that they had all fought was coming to a dramatic close. Bill Major returned overseas and was a battalion operations officer in Okinawa at the time of the evacuation of Saigon in April 1975. By force of arms, North and South Vietnam were reunified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, ending the war that had taken the lives of 58,000 Americans and three to four million Vietnamese.

"We had our tail between our legs and we were running," Major says. "I was very unhappy knowing that the United States could have beaten North Vietnam with both hands tied behind our back if we had wanted to win. We were the most capable military force in the world. We ended up fighting the enemy's war rather than our own. When Nixon finally decided to bring us to the peace table by bombing downtown Hanoi and mining their harbor, they came to the peace table very quickly. We should have done that ten years before."

Under the rules of engagement for the war, the military was prevented from mining Haiphong Harbor because of the presence of Russian ships, some of which were providing arms to the North Vietnamese. Pilots were prohibited from striking enemy MIG aircraft while they were still on the ground. The enemy planes had to be airborne with landing gear retracted before American forces could strike.

"What kind of war is that? The rules of engagement were for losers

and we lost," Major says. He was bitter toward the U.S. government because its strategy caused a lot of men to be killed or maimed. "I had some very close friends killed," he says. "I kept asking myself *Why? Why all of this when we could have won?*"

Jack Ruffer also blames government mismanagement for the loss of men and is critical of the war's rules of engagement. "How

many aircraft and aircrew did we lose because of those idiotic rules? Hundreds, no doubt."

"We had so much military power we could have won the war in a couple of years, perhaps even sooner if it had been an all-out effort, but the gradualism imposed by Washington didn't stand a chance of being successful," Ruffer adds. "We weren't allowed to hit them hard, and we certainly weren't permitted to win the war."

Ruffer's view of the war changed drastically during his tour. "When I left for Vietnam, I felt I was going there to save the South Vietnamese people from invasion by the communist north and prevent the domino theory from proving itself in practice," he says. "I came home with a much different perspective. The South Vietnamese people were in an impossible situation. They were on our side when we were close by; when we weren't, they sided with the VC or NVA. They had to in order to survive. Those village chiefs who sided with the South Vietnamese government and U.S. troops paid for their loyalty with their lives and the lives of their families. They were frequently butchered in front of other South Vietnamese people in order to terrorize the rest of the villagers into submission. It took a while, but I finally set aside those high ideals and simply fought for the Marines with whom I served. I wanted all of them to return home alive, and I wanted to go home alive as well."

About a year after he returned from Vietnam, the issue caused a heated argument between Ruffer and his brother Jim. At the time, Marine First Lieutenant Jim Ruffer was a pilot with VMA- 214 ("Black Sheep") flying A-4 Skyhawks out of MCAS El Toro. He was on his way to Vietnam where he would fly with VMA-223 ("Bulldogs") at Chu Lai. "He insisted that he was going to help the brave South Vietnamese people against the communist north," Jack Ruffer recalls. "I told him that was naive nonsense and that the best thing he could do was to not take any chances and 'check six' frequently to make damn sure he came home alive."

Many other Marines of Charlie Company came to the same

conclusion. Scott Camil is of the opinion that the Marines weren't really fighting for America or for the South Vietnamese. "In Vietnam, I was wasn't fighting for freedom. We were fighting to stay alive and to keep our buddies alive."

Dan Snell says he, too, was just fighting to stay alive. "Looking back on Vietnam, I think that we were right for the wrong reasons. It was OK to fight for your country and it was OK to fight for Charlie Company and to try to get your outfit back alive. My focus was not fighting communism or defending America. I was really fighting for the people I was with and trying to come home."

"The people that we were fighting against, the NVA and Vietnamese people, deserve a lot of respect," he says. "I have no hard feelings for the NVA. I thought that they were very brave." He says that although large-scale battles like Medina get a lot of attention, Vietnam was mostly about small events. "It was about the daily patrols, the small but intense encounters. It was chasing down a single sniper, medevacing a Marine who stepped on a mine and going back to camp with one less buddy. For me, these day-to-day, single-casualty events were the biggest part of Vietnam."

Dave Welsh says he would do it all over again. "I felt that I was doing something for this country. I still feel that way. I love this country and I would go to Vietnam again. I feel blessed because God allowed me to be born and live in this country. By no means do we do everything right in America, but I love it."

Welsh said the politicians were the Marine's biggest roadblocks, preventing them from accomplishing the task they were assigned. He notes that Lieutenant General "Chesty" Puller, the most decorated man in Marine history, said, "Give me all the people over here. I'll put them on line in South Vietnam and we'll sweep up through North Vietnam."

The politicians wouldn't let the Marines do any such thing.

"The VC set booby traps, but the politicians wouldn't let us do that," Welsh says. "We were not allowed to win the war. It was a very political war."

Welsh said the Marines and other soldiers in Vietnam were not warmongers or mercenaries, simply men "out to do what their country and government asked them to do." He said the men deserved a ticker tape parade and the respect of all Americans. "They don't have to agree with war or agree with all that went on but just

agree that we did it for a purpose: for them and their children and grandchildren."

Jackson believes the Marines' motives were misunderstood. "Who wants war?" he says. "I don't know anyone who wants to go kill another human being. But, that happens in a war and I firmly believe we did the right thing."

"I did what I had to do, and I wish we'd been successful," he continues. "And I'm sure our government made mistakes. But it's still my country."

Long-Term Effects

The Marines have many lingering effects from their service in the Corps.

Jack Ruffer thinks the pain and numbness in his lower back and upper legs that he continues to experience from his Medina injuries are "a small price to pay to have served in the world's finest." He considers himself lucky that he survived when so many didn't. "I know 42 names on the Wall. I think how lucky I am, having been as close as I was. I am still here, and I don't understand the Grand Scheme of Things. How is it that I survived when so many others didn't?"

"I realized how transient life is and how very quickly it can be snuffed out," he says. "So far, I've gotten forty more years out of my life than many of my friends got out of theirs. I feel that I have an obligation to do something good for people. This is why I feel that I have turned out to be the kind of person that I am. I try to dismiss any preconceived notions or prejudices and deal with people as they present themselves to me."

"I believe that there probably is an afterlife," he says, "and I look forward to meeting Cliff Robertson, Vic Kemp, Lee Blankenship, Walt Murphy, Stan Blessing, Bob Dodson, William T. Perkins and say thank you."

Ruffer has no interest in returning to Vietnam. "I would be haunted by the prospect of being on the battle ground of Medina again. It is hallowed ground, but it is also a place where I spent the worst night of my life. I don't want to see it again because of all the memories that would come flooding back."

Joe Zorn has no complaints. "I have four children and I am a new grandfather. Life has been good to me," he says. "I am 80% disabled

with PTSD and the effects of Agent Orange. I still have demons in my head, mostly from Medina. You just deal with it. I have a wonderful band of brothers who I am very tight with. I wouldn't wish Vietnam on my worst enemy, but I also wouldn't up give the friendships that I made there for the world."

Zorn, however, has made one promise to himself and to all veterans, past and present: "We will never let vets be treated like we were treated when we came back from Vietnam."

Rod Lewis came home in May of 1968 and went back to school. He ended up being a coach on the firing range for officers requiring re-qualification. His biggest struggle, like many veterans, has been with his personal relationships. He walked out on his first marriage, and a second marriage was short-lived. He is now married to his third wife.

"I've been married sixteen years," he said. "Now, I don't have all the anger that I had when I first got back. Vietnam affected my marriages."

Lewis has no fond memories of his experience. "I still hate Vietnam. A lot of guys go back there. I hate the place. The people wouldn't fight for themselves. All of my boys were dying for their stinking country." Time, however, has given him some new perspectives. "I've talked to a few Vietnamese who I have worked with over the years. I talked to one lady, and I got a different perspective from her. She was angry at us because we had left. She had escaped, but her parents were still over there. She was from Saigon. They had a brand new house and even had a washer and dryer, which was really rare for over there. When the Americans left, they lost it all."

Lewis says that part of his mind is still in combat mode: "I am always on patrol. I always try to know who's around me and where I'm at. I guess I just haven't gotten over that. People often walk by without noticing me, but I notice them. I know they are there because I'm always on patrol. I am always on alert."

Kane also had problems readjusting. After spending a year guarding a NATO base in Iceland, he was discharged from the military. He married, but the marriage was short-lived because of his hostility and a drinking problem, both side effects of the war. He also developed cancer from Agent Orange and is disabled because of his combat injuries. Still, he counts that night on Medina as the proudest moment of his life.

Robinson says Vietnam changed his life considerably. “Before Vietnam, I took everything for granted, including our freedom,” he says. “Where else in the world do you have the rights that we have as American citizens? I can’t think of any place.”

He’s thankful for all the brave men who contributed to the daring mission, especially the men of Delta who walked into danger for the men of Charlie. “I would just like to say thanks to Gunny Pelkey and every Marine who risked his life to save the Charlie Company Marines that were left.”

The thirst he experienced on Medina and other missions left a lasting impression on R.J. Jackson. “To this day, I don’t walk by a drinking fountain without taking a drink,” he says. “I don’t go to bed at night without a bottle of water next to my bed.”

Nelson has struggled with his shrapnel wounds since the ambush on the trail. Many pieces of shrapnel have worked their way to the surface over the years, and he has had to pull some of them out himself. Some were the size of small stones. “Every time I go through an X-ray, that stuff shows up,” he says. “I used to set off metal detectors at the airport.”

After seven surgeries, he still doesn’t have full use of his leg and has to wear a leg brace. Three years after Medina, his wife came home and found him semi-conscious on the floor. Nelson had suffered an aneurysm; a direct result of wounds suffered on Operation Medina. He had emergency surgery at the Naval Academy Hospital and later at Bethesda Naval Hospital when the problem flared up again.

He also had to deal with the emotional wounds. He said those Marines lucky enough to return to civilian life after Vietnam carried some of the negative feelings with them. “The anger and hatred that you endured and carried with you back to civilian life made adjusting very hard,” he says. “The anger was toward the villagers, but it spills over when you get back. You become angry with anybody who sees things differently than you do. A lot of the guys were angry with the protesters and angry with the leaders who got them there in the first place. Eventually, they were just angry with everybody. I went through that.”

Like many of the Marines, Dan Snell didn’t know many of the details of the intense operation until years later. He didn’t find out until 2002 that Captain Major disobeyed a direct order when he had Snell medevaced out. “When you are a warrior, there is a time to

obey orders and a time when you don't," he says. "You never know when that time is. In my particular case, whatever Captain Major did, it saved my life. If it didn't save my life, it certainly saved my leg."

Some details of the war come back to the Marines when triggered by a sensory image. Snell had been mesmerized by the gurgling noise of blood in the lungs of a Marine he carried on Medina. Years later, back in America, he was out deer hunting. He shot a deer broadside. The bullet passed through both lungs and shattered the heart. "When I grabbed the deer's fore leg to roll it over, it made that same whistling, gurgling sound that I heard in Vietnam. It was the only time that I had anything close to a flashback."

That was the last deer he ever shot.

Ron Coss also has vivid sensory memories of Medina, especially the atmosphere of the LZ the morning after the battle. "If I close my eyes, and take a deep breath, I can still smell it," he says. "I can smell the jungle, I can smell the blood, I can smell the aftermath, I can smell the skin, the blood."

Bill Major has found that Christianity helps him cope with the ghosts of his past. After his 27-year marriage ended in a stressful divorce, he met his current wife, a devout Christian. She encouraged him to attend church with her. "I accepted the Lord during that first year," he says. "When I was Marine company commander, I didn't have the relationship with the Lord that I do now, even though I was a God-fearing individual."

"I didn't lean on the Lord at all in Vietnam," he adds. "Now, I wish I had. It would have been nice to have His strength. I was doing it all myself for all the wrong reasons. I was doing it for pride and ego. It would have been a lot easier if I had leaned on God instead. A sound prayer is very helpful."

Mark Anderson acknowledges that many men have emotional problems linked to their service in Vietnam, but he is still bothered by the media stereotypes of Vietnam vets. "For years, every show on TV, if they showed a Vietnam vet, he was insane, a murderer, a drug addict, or all the above," he says. "The very first guy that came along who wasn't these things was Magnum P.I. He was a Vietnam veteran, he was the star of the show, and he wasn't nuts. This country learns everything from TV."

He said that all these years later, people are still squeamish about

the topic of Vietnam. His medals are hanging in a frame in his house, but most people look at them, realize what they are, and immediately turn away. Some young guests at the house are interested in the medals, but no one from his own generation asks Anderson what the awards are for. “I guess they think I’ll go nuts,” he says.

Brad Foote, now the owner of a construction business, also notices that people try to cram him into a stereotype of Vietnam veterans. “We’re not all homeless and drunks,” he says. “I have 10-20 people working for me. We have a good business. We have a nice new home. I have three grown up boys, good kids.”

Phil Seymour also dislikes being pegged into a stereotype, but he understands the origin of the negative images. He acknowledges that the horrors of the war were enough to leave many men “genuinely screwed up.”

Even the ones who held their lives together often battled alcohol and drug addictions. Dennis Antal says at first he used drugs to try to erase his experiences in Vietnam. He went through two failed marriages before getting his life on track and putting the war behind him.

Long after the war, Doc Dowd went on a pilgrimage to connect to men who shared his experiences and realized first-hand how veterans handled their memories of Vietnam in different ways. On that pilgrimage, he found four other men who were there when Kevin Cahill died: Mike Robinson, Paul Nelson, Bill Church, and Doff Edwards, the Marine who dove on Dowd while he was treating Cahill. He also visited Cahill’s brother.

“For a lot of these guys, I get the feeling that they have put Vietnam way behind them,” Dowd said. Four days after their visit, Dowd called Edwards to thank him for his hospitality. Edwards agreed that the visit was a nice one, but he added: “Let’s make it the last one.” Dowd’s visit had brought up so many negative memories and emotions that Edwards just wanted to bury the past again.

Dowd certainly understands the sentiment. He has suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder since the war and has been under psychiatric care. “The rage caused by PTSD is the hardest thing to deal with,” he says. “It’s not rational. In one part of your brain, you know that it’s not rational, but you are overwhelmed with a drive toward that rage.” He says the anger is caused by the pain of the losses suffered in Vietnam, and the injustice of those great losses.

“The rage is a response to the pain.”

He is learning to deal with the pain instead of translating it into anger. The country’s attitudes toward Vietnam vets, however, hasn’t helped.

“A lot of the rage was caused by the way we were treated,” he says. “After WWII, a vet who had PTSD was given a break by his boss. The boss would say, ‘Hey look, take a few days off with pay, get yourself together and come back to work.’ With us, if you showed any signs like that, the response was ‘We really can’t deal with this… maybe you need to go find someplace else to work.’ Then they’d fire you.”

“Over the last 39 years, my labors have consisted of holding myself together,” he adds. “I haven’t killed anybody. I haven’t ended up in prison. It’s hard to hold a job when you’re trying to hold yourself together. All of your energy goes toward holding yourself together. You don’t have any left to do your job. It is the same thing with relationships. I have enough difficulty living with myself. How can I expect anyone else to live with me?”

During his pilgrimage, Dowd visited the grave of fallen point man Kevin Cahill. He knelt on the grave to say good-bye. “I told him that ‘I don’t know if I could have done any more. I don’t know if it was your time. You know, I’ve been carrying you in my heart ever since. I guess I can let you rest now seeing that you’re comfortable.’”

Doc Hammergren eventually retired from the military after 22 years and numerous awards, including a Purple Heart, the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry, and a Navy Achievement Medal. He has discovered that many people are re-evaluating their attitudes toward Vietnam. Once when he was stationed in Boston, a female staff sergeant was admiring the ribbons and medals on his uniform. She said, “You were in Vietnam, weren’t you?” When Hammergren said he was, she admitted that during the war she lived in San Francisco and had participated in anti-war demonstrations, even throwing rocks at the returning soldiers. She said, “I just want to take this time right now, to tell you as a representative of everybody else, I’m sorry and thank you.”

Before he moved back to Missouri, the memories of the war were a part of Hammergren’s daily life in Sacramento, California. A distance runner, he used to run down to the State Capitol grounds and pass through the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial, located at the northeast corner of the park. “I used to go through that memorial at

least three times a week, take my hat off, and say good morning to the lads and tell them to have a good day."

Steve Kane has license plates identifying him as a Purple Heart recipient (he received two.). One day in 2004, a man pulled up behind him, got out of his car, and asked which occupant of the car was a Purple Heart recipient.

"I am," Kane said.

"I want to thank you for your service to your country," the man said.

After almost 40 years, it was the first time anyone had thanked Kane.

Despite the negative aspects of war, Scott Camil often misses the camaraderie. "The camaraderie that you develop in combat, no civilian can understand. There was a time when four of us were sharing one toothbrush." He said he shared letters from his girlfriend with men who didn't get letters from girlfriends. He also gave his buddies some of the cookies his parents sent. "We learned to take care of each other and do what was necessary," he says. "You don't have that in civilian life. It set a standard of camaraderie that I will always miss."

Snell says his experiences refined his definition of patriotism. "Today, I don't necessarily agree with the politics of my country, but I support the troops on the ground. To me, patriotism means love of country, not love of government. When we came back from Vietnam, there was little support for the troops. It was like, 'Hurry up and get 'em out.' Vietnam was the war that no one wanted to talk about."

He says the recent wars have highlighted the difference in public opinion. "When Lieutenant Kemp was killed, we had nine guys from just one platoon killed in one day. Only a few people know about it. If those guys had been killed in Afghanistan, it would have been on the cover of *Newsweek*. Everybody killed in Afghanistan or Iraq becomes a hero. In Vietnam, in one or two days, we lost the same number of people that were killed in all of Desert Storm."

His experiences have changed his outlook on life. "The main lesson that I learned from Vietnam is that life is temporary. We all hang by a thread. In Vietnam, you could be walking down a trail and step on a mine or be shot by a sniper in the tree line. Ordinary civilian life is like Vietnam, even though we don't have quite the awareness of it. Any time you drive down a highway, a truck is only three feet from

your bumper as it passes you. If it doesn't happen to us, at any time the people that we care about can be snatched away from us. We need to realize how precious life is. There is no time to waste."

Welsh is often struck by the fact that men served a relatively short time in Vietnam, yet that time had such a long-standing impact on their lives. "If you didn't go through it, it's hard to understand," he says. "It's still in me. If I watch a program on TV about Vietnam, I start crying." He visited The Wall in Washington, D.C., and found the names of some men he had served with. "At the time, I didn't know if they were alive or dead. Now I knew they were dead. It hasn't taken control of me, but I'm emotional over it still."

He says he's retained the best attributes of being a Marine and applied them to his life. "I have a real staunchness," he says. "I believe in protecting our country. I was working out at our local Y and there were a couple of other Marines in there. They were even a little older than I am. When things started happening in Afghanistan, we all said that we would volunteer today. Let the young ones stay and we'll go. The one guy checked into it but they said that we were too old."

Welsh, who is now a minister, says his Vietnam experience helped him understand many concepts. "It's helped me to understand fear, hurt, pain, need, and ignorance. It's helped me to understand how people really need each other in a loving and supportive way. That can take away a lot of the fighting and the wars we have. It's helped me to have a perspective on life as well as a perspective on how to be a Christian." Like Bill Major, he didn't have particularly strong religious beliefs while in Vietnam, but then he met and married a Christian woman and eventually became a minister. Even in his field, however, he encounters lingering resentment about Vietnam. That resentment was obvious at a meeting he attended with a group of pastors. The ministers were about to pray when a pastor from another denomination said, "I want you to know that I don't support Vietnam vets."

"I never did pursue that with him," Welsh says. "I don't know if he knew that I was a vet or not. He was a guy who was my age or a little bit older. He was from a pacifist denomination. He didn't believe in war, and that's OK. I don't want to see war either. The way he said that, however, made me feel like I was something lower than human. I belong to the Lord and have surrendered my life to Him, but even

today people still say things like that."

"It's OK if people have the perspective that Vietnam was an unjust war, even if I don't agree with them," Welsh says. "They still forget the people who were in that war. We were and still are important."

Welsh said that sentiment should apply to the war in Iraq or any military actions. "It's OK to be against the war. But don't be against the people who went out and did what they thought was right. We did what our country asked us to do, just like those citizens who answered the call in WWII and Korea. God has given us this country and he has really blessed us. Part of accepting and enjoying that blessing is standing up for it. That is paying taxes and not burning the flag."

He said Vietnam veterans want closure more than recognition. "We can get closure by dealing with the situation we were in, knowing that we were all in the same boat and knowing that we weren't any better or worse than the next man. When all of us who served on Medina went into the Marine Corps, Vietnam was still a patriotic issue. When most of us got out, we were not considered to be good citizens of this country. I had people ask me when I first came back: 'How could you shoot children?' How do you answer a stupid question like that?"

Boze also credits religion for helping him cope with his traumatic past. "I'm at ease with what I've done, as far as what I did in Vietnam," he says. He is not at ease with the unpleasantness he faced from family members after the war but says he is at peace with a more important source: " One thing that it says in the Bible: 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.' I believe that."

He says that he lives by John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

"I believe it," he says. "We all live by this motto. The greatest thing that you can give is not your money or a car or a ride or a shirt off your back. It's when you actually put your life on the line for your friends. You think about them before you think about yourself. I did it two nights in a row. I'm sorry that the people that I dragged back died. That was out of my hands. I know that I got them back to Hammergren and he did what he could to save them. God doesn't have a problem with me, and I don't have a problem with Him. Sometimes I wonder why we have to have wars instead of

conversations."

Now Boze helps veterans work with the government to receive the benefits they deserve. Recently, he heard about a Vietnamese program that seeks to locate at least some of Vietnam's 300,000 missing war dead. He contacted the Vietnamese embassy to report where he had disposed of the NVA bodies from the Medina battlefield. He doubts, however, that the remains will be found in the obscure part of the jungle where he tossed them.

"Looking back, going into the Corps was the best thing that could have happened to me," recalls George Dougherty. "It more than likely saved my life." Dougherty credits the Corps for giving him a different outlook on life. "It showed me that you deserve only what you work for and that nothing in life is free. It gave me an appreciation for life and the best group of friends a man could ask for."

George Hutchings credits Morgan Bice for saving his life twice: physically and spiritually. Bice was the first person to tell him about a living God, and then he died in Hutchings' place. The spiritual parallels were not lost on Hutchings: "Christ died in my place, and I can tell that God has had his hand of Providence on me for a reason," he says. Now a missionary, when Hutchings preaches the gospel all over the world, he tells the story of how Cpl Quentin Morgan Bice died for him.

His path has taken him from being a warrior to pastor of a church to college administrator and to missionary with an organization that has delivered several million dollars' worth of medical supplies to Kenya. Each accomplishment he credits to Bice. "I would have never become a Christian. I would have never become a person of faith any other way. This was the hand of Providence, and I think he died to make me the person that I'm supposed to be."

He says that Christianity has given him a better perspective on what he went through when he looked down a steep hill on 12 October to see a battle raging below. "Isaiah says that hell is a place of outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. And I thought that I had died and gone to hell."

He's written a book, *Faith for the Fractured Heart*, about his life experiences, but he understands why many veterans prefer not to talk about their war past. "Some people cannot talk about it because it was such a horrible experience they don't want to recall it, and they

have no redemptive experience that came from it," he says. "All they have was death, more death and the stench of blood in their nostrils. And
in their ears they hear their friends crying. And they don't want to remember that they can recall it."

"Now, I can talk about it because out of all the evil things that I saw and participated in and did and had done to me, good things have come from it. And because good things have come from it, it served a purpose."

Although he spends his days peacefully trying to usher people into the kingdom of Heaven, Hutchings always keeps a can of peaches on his desk as a reminder of his night in hell.

Many of the men are haunted by those who died on Medina. The memory of point man Kevin Cahill lying on the trail evokes particular emotion for Nelson. "To me, that was a life-defining moment. I was critical of myself in that I wasn't as observant as I should have been in letting K.C. wander up the trail. K.C. was my guy and I saw him mortally hit. If I hadn't made the effort to save him, it would have been very difficult to live with myself from that day forward. Over the years, I have felt better about myself because I tried to save him."

But his actions weren't able to erase all of the emotions. "To this day, I feel horrible about what happened to K.C. I lost him."

Doc Dowd, who watched his friend die, was plagued by guilt in the days following Medina. "I thought I had failed. I thought that I hadn't done everything I could have done to save him." A doctor, however, told Dowd that if Cahill had been shot on the front steps of any hospital in the United States, he would have had only a 50/50 chance of survival. "K.C. was shot fifteen miles up in the rainforest and an hour and a half from the nearest medevac," Dowd says. "K.C. didn't have a chance. There is no way to bandage internal bleeding. The doctor's words made me feel better, but it still never erased the pain. To this day I wonder if I had started an IV sooner, would he be OK? Was there anything else I could have done?"

"I remind myself that I did what I could," he says. But he still thinks of Cahill frequently.

The family members of those lost on Medina have also faced their own conflicts. Some have special reminders of their loved ones; others have only memories.

Among Bill Perkins' effects returned to his family were the Flash Phantom camera his father had given him and the Sea Wolf wristwatch he was wearing when he died. The Perkins home, however, was broken into and the camera was stolen. Bill Perkins Sr. kept his son's watch until his own death in 2006.

Jim Priddy, who joined up with Perkins, is still shaken by thoughts of his friend's death on top of an enemy grenade. "Time must have stood still for Bill when he saw the grenade, in the thought process

of what he had to do and then – and this is the part that haunts me to this day – of how much time there was from when he landed on the grenade to when the grenade went off. How long that must have seemed – or did it seem like a long time? We'll never know, or maybe we will. I'm not religious but I'm a spiritual person, and I hope someday I will be able to talk with Bill again."

In 1991, the William T. Perkins Jr. Hall, located at the Second Marine Division Combat Camera Section of Camp Lejeune, was dedicated. Priddy spoke at the ceremony. At the time, the Marines were preparing to go into Kuwait. "I can remember vividly giving this speech and hearing in the background the training going on hearing loud explosions, which I still can't handle. I found it ironic that here I'm dedicating this to my friend and here we are preparing for war again."

Priddy credits Perkins for giving him the outlook on life and sense of humor that allowed him to fight his drug addiction and endure a recent battle with cancer. He says his relationship with Perkins was one of the most influential things in his life. "It developed my sense of humor. It helped me not to take things so seriously. It has gotten me through life. Nothing is going to get me down. I can thank Bill for that."

He said he has tried to pass on that sense of humor to his two children, along with a respect for the men and women who fight for America.

"They both know a lot about Bill Perkins. I have a photo album. I show it to them all the time. I have three or four pages dedicated to Bill."

He still misses his friend. "He loved life. He just loved being himself. There was no pretense in Bill at all. When something is funny, when something funny happens, quirky funny, I know Bill is there thinking, *that's funny.*"

Bill's death was not the only tragedy for the Perkins family. Eleven years after Bill was killed, Bobby, Bill's younger brother, died of cancer. Bill Sr. and Marilane eventually divorced.

The last film that Bill Perkins shot was eventually developed. It shows the Catholic Mass, choppers transporting Marines to LZ Dove, some brief footage of the Charlie Company column moving toward the ambush site, and the wounded men being medevaced out just before the battle in which Perkins was killed.

Cecilia Bazulto has a living memory of her husband. She gave birth four months after he was killed. As Sal had predicted, the couple had a son, who she named Salvador Bazulto III. Her husband had a special jacket made with a design that indicated that he was a proud member of a Marine rocket squad. That jacket had a map of Vietnam and Sal's name on the back. Instead of embroidering "Sal Jr.", however, a mistake was made and "Sal III" was written instead. Her son, the real "Sal III", now owns his father's jacket.

Even though he had a loving stepfather after age four, Cecilia feels her son suffered a great loss.

"As he got older, he would see the relationship that his friends had with their fathers, with their real fathers, and he thought there's just a bonding there that he's missing out on. There's just something about that real relationship between a father and a son, and he just saw that he got cheated. And to this day, in his heart he just misses his dad so much and resents that his dad didn't come home. He resents that he didn't have his real dad with him. And as much as I try to tell him there is nothing that we could have done to prevent it, it happened and we just have to accept it, we have to pray to God to give us the grace to accept what we can't change and just go on with our lives."

She gets solace from the words in the last letter she received from her husband: "No matter what happens, if anything should happen to me, always remember that I'll always love you."

Although Pauline Brothers Befumo lost the child she was carrying when she heard the news of her brother Gerald's death, she eventually had another child, a son she named Gerald.

Margaret Castanon, sister of John Castillo, says her brother's death had a profound impact on their family. "I saw my dad turn gray overnight," she says. John's other sister Theresa, who was pregnant at the time of John's death, named her son John.

Dennis Lee, brother of John Lee, was shocked by the country's attitude toward the veterans. "I felt cheated because John lost his life, and the country didn't stand behind him." When the Traveling Wall came to Eugene, Dennis Lee took his family to see it. "That's the first time the kids ever saw me cry."

"He was a dedicated, patriotic young man who cared a lot for his fellow man, his fellow Marines," remembers Dennis Lee of his brother.

Kelly Swoboda, Stan Blessing's sister, carried the last picture taken of her brother in her purse until it was stolen. But she still thinks about him. "I miss him. I miss him to this day," she says. "I wonder what he'd be doing, what his kids would be like. It'd be nice for my kids to be able to know their uncle."

She says she always tells people who are estranged from their siblings to make up with each other. "Because when you lose one, you don't get them back. Love them. Love them for the day every day for what they are and who they are. People sometimes say, 'I don't talk to my brother or sister.' Well, wait till you lose them and you'll wonder why you ever said that."

Blessing's parents struggled to deal with his death. In old age, his father spoke frequently about seeing his son again. When his father eventually died, his ashes were buried at the foot of Stan's grave.

Before he left for Vietnam, Oliver Bell had a dream that someday his mother would live in a house, not an apartment. When he was in Vietnam, he started sending money home for that purpose. When he died, his remaining income and death benefits were used to build the house Bell wanted for his mother.

"The contractors, they built that house in rapid time in memory of him, 'cause they knew him, too," says uncle Thomas Snell. Bell's mother lived out her life in the house her son built for her.

Rose Castillo was cleaning her attic almost a decade after her son John's death when she found a Christmas card her son had sent from Vietnam. When she had received the card the first time, she had simply read the Christmas greeting imprinted on it. But all those years later she realized that there was a personal message from her son on the inside flap, words she had never read before. He told his family how much he loved them and missed them. "He was a very caring person," she says. "Very outgoing. Very lovable. And he loved his country. He really wanted to serve his country."

Morgan Bice's sister Carolyn says her parents changed after her brother's death. They would often leave her in charge of the younger children and go for long drives in the country. They also became far less strict with the other children. But tragedy wasn't finished with the family: Morgan's brother died in a gun accident when he was 20. Morgan had died at 21.

Betty Bice is proud of her son's patriotism, but she still mourns his loss. "There's always a big empty space in your heart," she says. "Nobody knows what it is till you lose a child. You can lose your spouse or things like that, but when you lose the one that was laid in your arms one time, it's really different. A lot of people say 'I understand,' but really, down deep in the heart, they don't."

2005 Reunion, First Battalion, First Marines, Las Vegas, Nevada.
From left to right back row: Mike Cole, unknown Marine, Brad Foote,
Ed "Rowdy" Yates, Jack Ruffer, Mike Robinson; kneeling in front: J.J. Zorn.

Captain Bill Major retired as a lieutenant colonel. Along with his Medina medals, he earned a Bronze Star with Combat "V" for Operation Pike and two Navy Commendations with a combat "V." He went into real estate in Southern California and is now living in Okatie, South Carolina.

First Lieutenant Jack Ruffer would later, as a major, become the Operations Officer of the First Marine Regiment and then XO of the First Marine Regiment, the same regiment he had served with in Vietnam. Along with his Medina medals (Silver Star and Purple Heart), he received a Bronze Star with Combat "V."

The pressure of long hours while serving as a battalion operations officer and then as Division Inspector of the First Marine Division, and attending college at night and on weekends, took its toll on Jack and Pat's marriage. They divorced in April 1977.

He retired from the Marine Corps in 1981, completed graduate school, and was hired by a little "high-tech firm" few had heard of at the time called Apple Computer. In 1983, Jack and Pat remarried. After eight years as a senior manager at Apple, the couple moved from the Silicon Valley to Palm Desert, California, where they now live.

Second Lieutenant Robert Anderson medically retired as a first lieutenant as the result of wounds received in the Battle for Hue City during the Tet Offensive in January 1968. He is a published author and playwright living in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He has founded two theater groups and co-produced a radio program of political satire in 1995 and 1996. He taught English as a second language at New York University's American Language Institute and has worked as a magazine writer and editor. That fateful night on Medina is briefly chronicled in two of his books, *Cooks and Bakers*, and *Service for the Dead*.

First Lieutenant Paul Nelson was medically retired from the Marine Corps as a result of the severe wounds he received on Medina. After teaching business management classes for several different colleges and universities in northern Michigan, he is now retired and lives in Petoskey, Michigan.

Captain James Gallagher (Delta Company) retired from the Marine Corps in 1986 as a lieutenant colonel. After spending some time

selling real estate, he now teaches Language Arts and Social Studies to sixth graders in Fallbrook, California. He has four children and three grandchildren.

After he retired from the Marine Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Albert F. Belbusti worked for several firms as an office manager, finally settling with Sperry Univac (later Unisys) where he spent eight years as a financial analyst until his retirement at age sixty-two. He lives in Virginia Beach, Virginia with his wife of fifty-five years. He has six children and thirteen grandchildren scattered across the country. He spends his time playing golf and raising vegetables in his garden.

After owning his own fence company for 10 years, Mark Anderson accepted a position with the Winnetka, Illinois Park District, where he is now the assistant golf course superintendent. He and his wife Patty have two children, Jeff and April.

Dennis Antal is a semi-retired, self-employed carpenter. He spends a great deal of time with his four grandchildren and travels to Las Vegas about every other month to visit his son. He stays in touch with Mike Cole about once a week. Looking back, Vietnam seems like a million years ago for Dennis. Every night, however, it pops back into his head. He and his wife live in Barberton, Ohio.

Karl Bockman changed his name back to Karl Falster (his name before his mother remarried) and has been an entrepreneur since the war's end. He started a landscaping and nursery business with locations across the south, a delicatessen franchise, and a specialty retail store franchise dealing with knives and black powder weapons. Today, he is a cattle rancher in Wood County, Texas.

Fred Boxill is last known to have lived in the Boston area.

George Boze now lives in Frankfurt, Germany.

John Brittan is last known to have lived in Colleyville, Texas.

Scott Camil has been an anti-war/peace activist since 1971. He has been the founder of or has served on the board of various anti-war organizations since that time. He has been happily married to his wife Sherry for just over ten years. Between them, they have five children and one granddaughter. He lives in Gainesville, Florida.

After spending 34 years in telecommunications, Mike Cole retired in 2003. Married twice, he has two children and three grandchildren. He lives in Zebulon, North Carolina, and still wears a hearing aid because of the grenade blast on Medina.

Dick Conklin (Delta Company) retired from the military after 22

years and became a civil servant. He now works as a security officer. He and his wife Virginia live in Enola, Pennsylvania.

Ron Coss is retired after working at International Harvester Trucks for 31 years. He lives in Springfield, Ohio.

Bill Cooley retired from the Marine Corps as a first sergeant and was last known to live in Washington state.

George Dougherty lives in Staten Island, NY. He used the G.I. Bill to attend City University, where he received a Masters Degree in History. For the past 35 years, he has worked for Key Span Energy Corp. He and his wife Randi have four children and six grandchildren.

HM3 Wayne Dowd is disabled and now lives in central California.

Doff Edwards is a retired Washington, D.C. policeman.

Brad Foote lives in LaPine, Oregon. He first worked at the small construction company he and his father started. He obtained his contractor's license, enlarged the business, and has been building in Oregon for the past 41 years. Married for 33 years, he has three sons and two grandsons. He's active in his local American Legion and belongs to the VFW.

Glenn Griffin (Delta Company) lives near Syracuse, New York, with Sandra, his wife of 35 years. They have five children and six grandchildren. After the war, he went to college with help from the G.I. Bill and received his bachelor's degree in secondary education. He ended up working in sales and has been with the same company for 28 years, working his way up to an executive position.

Combat correspondent Phil Hartranft retired from the Marine Corps in 1980 and settled back in his hometown of Montgomery, Pennsylvania. His two daughters have presented him with three granddaughters and one grandson. He has worked for the U.S. Postal Service for 20 years and plans to retire soon.

HN Kermit Hammergren retired from the Navy in 1988. He now lives in Nevada, Missouri and works at the Nevada Habilitation Center as an aide for developmentally disabled adults. He and his wife Kate have two sons and eight grandchildren.

Robert "Sanitary Bob" Headrick finished his tour in Vietnam but was killed in a drive-by shooting in 1970 in Harbor City, California.

Hugh Helm graduated from Georgetown University Law School in 1977 and currently has his own law practice in Santa Rosa, California.

George Hutchings is a missionary and an author who tells the story of Morgan Bice around the world.

Ed Krisko lives in Covington, Louisiana.

R.J. Jackson served for five years as a San Diego police officer before becoming the first probate investigator for the Superior Court in San Diego. He worked undercover for the Nevada Gaming Commission and was one of two agents who found a phony fill slip at the Stardust that started the downfall of several casinos. He now runs a travel management company, Trading Places Management. He has three children.

Steve Kane spent many years working for the fire department in his hometown of Lawrence, Massachusetts, where he has lived his entire life. He recently retired and is feeling better than ever.

Combat artist Mike Leahy went into reserve status after 25 months of active duty during the Vietnam War. When he left active duty in 1969, he was awarded the Bronze Star with Combat "V". He became a civilian information manager for the Office of Naval Research and the Naval Air Systems Command in Washington. During the Watergate Hearings, he produced courtroom art for ABC. Retired from government service, he still creates combat art in his North Carolina studio, some of which can be seen on his website, www.thehootch. com. His work includes images from Operation Medina.

Rod Lewis returned home to his wife and daughter. He went back to school and received a B.S. in Business Administration from Portland State University. Several years later he became a CPA. He has worked for a major utility company in Portland, Oregon for 25 years. He has seven grandchildren and is married to his third wife, Sandy. They live in Lake Oswego, Oregon, in the same house Rod has occupied for the last 30 years.

Bruce Martin wrote an article about Operation Medina that appeared in the February 1968 issue of *Leatherneck* Magazine. The article was voted Best Combat Story of the Year 1967 by the Marine Corps Combat Correspondents, Photographers and Artists Association. He eventually retired from the Marine Corps as a Master Sergeant and became a school teacher in Pensacola, Florida.

Mike Robinson married twice and is the father of eight children. He is the proud grandfather of twelve grandchildren. He worked for

Pacur for twenty years and now has an Internet based business. He lives in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

In addition to the Navy Commendation Medal with combat "V" that he received on Medina, Phil Seymour received a Bronze Star with combat "V" and a Purple Heart for his role during The Raid. He received his commission as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps on 15 August 1975. He graduated from Northeastern University School of Law in 1978, returned to active duty and practiced criminal law for 10 years at Marine Corps bases around the world. After serving the military in various legal roles, he retired in 1994 and lives in New Bern, North Carolina with his wife Lynne.

Dan Snell works for the U.S. Forest Service. One of his recent assignments involved working as a biological technician doing wildlife surveys on the Kootenai National Forest in Montana. He also fights forest fires in Montana.

Gunnery Sergeant Thomas E. Thompson retired from the Marine Corps in 1968. He worked as a specialty steel sales manager for Block Iron & Supply, retiring in 1994. Thompson died in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in October 1996. At the time of his death, Thompson was survived by his wife Katherine, his mother, stepmother, two sons and seven grandchildren.

David Welsh is a church pastor living in Macy, Indiana. He is married and has three sons.

Ed "Rowdy" Yates received the Bronze Star with Combat "V" for actions during Operation Ford on 18 March 1968. He graduated from Western Kentucky University and is employed by the Kentucky Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Air Quality, as an environmental inspector. A widower with two sons and two grandsons, he lives near Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Joe Zorn lives in Coram, New York. He is employed as the Telecommunications Director for Saint Francis Hospital and Mercy Medical Center. He has four children and one grandchild.

Principal Characters

Anderson, Mark T. (LCpl): H&S Company, 81mm Mortars, Forward Observer. Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) Radioman attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Mundelein, Illinois.

Anderson, Robert A. (Second Lieutenant): Platoon Commander, Second Platoon, Charlie Company. From Pompano Beach, Florida.

Antal, Dennis J. (LCpl): Assault Section, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company, attached to Third Platoon, Charlie Company on Operation Medina. Part of the ABC squad of Antal, Boxill, and Cole. From Barberton, Ohio.

Bazulto Jr., Salvador (Sgt): Assault Squad Leader, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company attached to First Platoon, Charlie Company, on Operation Medina. From Los Angeles, California.

Belbusti, Albert F. (Lieutenant Colonel): Battalion Commander of First Battalion, First Marine Regiment, First Marine Division on Operation Medina. From Framingham, Massachusetts.

Bell, Oliver Jr. (Pvt): Rifleman, Second Platoon, Charlie Company. From Pompano Beach, Florida.

Bice, Quinton Morgan (Cpl): Fireteam Leader, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. Friend of George Hutchings. From Texas City, Texas.

Blessing, William S. (PFC): Rifleman, First Platoon, Charlie Company. From Denver, Colorado.

Bockman, Karl (Karl Falser) (LCpl): Machine Gunner, Weapons Platoon, Delta Company attached to First Platoon, Delta Company on Operation Medina. From Charleston, South Carolina.

Boxill, Fred (Cpl): Assault Section, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company, attached to Third Platoon, Charlie Company on Operation Medina. Part of the ABC squad of Antal, Boxill, and Cole. From Boston, Massachusetts.

Boze, George C. (LCpl): 81mm Mortars Forward Observer, H&S Company, attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Battle Creek, Michigan.

Brittan, John A. (Cpl): Fireteam Leader, Second Squad, Second Platoon,

Charlie Company. From Colleyville, Texas.

Brothers, Gerald J. (PFC): Rifleman, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From San Diego, California.

Cahill, Kevin A. (LCpl): Rifleman, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Lynn, Massachusetts. Friend of Doff Edwards, Steve Kane and Wayne Dowd.

Camil, Scott (Sgt): A/1/11 Arty Forward Observer, attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Gainesville, Florida.

Carter, Marshall (Captain): Commander of Charlie Company from 15 October 1966 to 30 April 1967. From Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Castillo, John J. (PFC): Rifleman, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Saginaw, Michigan.

Chambers, Kenneth E. (LCpl): Fireteam Leader, First Platoon, Charlie Company. From Richmond, Virginia.

Church, Michael A. (LCpl): Charlie Company Radioman on Operation Medina. From Linthicum, Maryland.

Cole, Michael P. (LCpl): Assault Section, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company, attached to Third Platoon, Charlie Company on Operation Medina. Part of the ABC squad of Antal, Boxill and Cole. From Zebulon, North Carolina.

Conklin, Dick (HM2): Navy Corpsman, H&S Company attached to Delta Company. From Johnson City, New York.

Cooley, William H. (SSgt): Platoon Sergeant, First Platoon, Charlie Company. From Washington State.

Coss, Ronald L. (LCpl): Second Squad, Assault Section, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company, attached to Second Platoon, Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Springfield, Ohio.

De Abre, James M. (PFC): Rifleman, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Morgan Hill, California.

Dougherty, George (Cpl): Rifleman, Second Squad, Second Platoon, Charlie Company. From Staten Island, New York.

Dowd, Wayne F, (HM3): Navy Corpsman, H&S Company, attached to

Third Platoon, Charlie Company (but Second Platoon for Operation Medina). From Cottonwood, CA.

Edwards, Doff (Cpl): Squad Leader, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Washington, D.C. Friend of Kevin Cahill.

Eisenson, Henry L. (Captain): Pilot of a Marine UH-34 helicopter from HMM-163 on Operation Medina.

Foote, Bradford L. (Pvt): Squad Leader, Second Squad, Second Platoon, Charlie Company. Best friend of John Lee. From Bend, Oregon.

Gallagher, James (Captain): Company Commander of Delta Company, First Battalion, First Marines on Operation Medina. From Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Griffin, Glenn (Cpl): Platoon Radioman, First Platoon, Delta Company. From Warwick, New York.

Hamamoto, Cecilia Bazulto: Widow of Sgt Salvador Bazulto. Hammergren, Kermit A. (HN): Navy Corpsman, H&S Company, attached to Second Platoon, Charlie Company. From El Dorado Springs, Missouri.

Hartranft, Philip (SSgt): Combat Correspondent (Print Journalism), attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Montgomery, Pennsylvania.

Headrick, Robert (LCpl): Machine Gun Section, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company, attached to Second Platoon, Charlie Company on Operation Medina. A member of Hell's Angels in civilian life, he was known as "Sanitary" Bob in Charlie Company.

Helm, Hugh N. (Cpl): Rifleman, First Platoon, Charlie Company. From Warren, Ohio.

Hutchings, George P. (Cpl): Radioman, Third Squad, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Manchester, Missouri. Friend of Morgan Bice.

Jackson, R.J. (LCpl): Sniper Platoon, First Marine Regiment, attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Eagle Rock, California.

Kane, Stephen M. (PFC) A/1/11 Artillery Forward Observer Team Radioman. From Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Kemp, Robert Victor "Vic" (First Lieutenant): Platoon Commander, First

Platoon, Charlie Company, in August, 1967. From Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Krisko, Edward M. (Pvt): Rifleman, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Covington, Louisiana.

Lampo, Steven (First Lieutenant) Platoon Commander, First Platoon, Delta Company. From Niosho, Missouri.

LaVallee, Michael E. (LCpl): First Platoon Radioman, Charlie Company. From Hennepin, Minnesota.

Leahy, A. Michael (Major): Executive Officer, Marine Combat Art Program, covered Charlie Company on Operation Medina from 13 to 14 October, 1967. From Somerville, Massachusetts.

Lee, John R. (Cpl): Fireteam Leader, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. Best friend of Brad Foote. From Creswell, Oregon.

Lesnik, Michael E. (Captain): Forward Air Controller attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From San Diego, California.

Lewis, Rod (Cpl): Sniper Platoon, First Marine Regiment, attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Lake Oswego, Oregon.

Livingston, Thomas E. (Sgt): Platoon Sergeant, Third Platoon, Charlie Company.

Major, William D. (Captain): Company Commander of Charlie Company, First Battalion, First Marines on Operation Medina. From Livingston, New Jersey.

Martin, Bruce A. (SSgt): Combat Correspondent (*Leatherneck* Magazine) attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. His article, *Let's Go Charlie*, about Charlie Company's participation in Operation Medina, won "Best Combat Story of the Year 1967" by the then Marine Corps Combat Correspondents, Photographers and Artists Association.

Nelson, Paul S. (First Lieutenant): Platoon Commander, Third Platoon, Charlie Company. From Petoskey, Michigan.

Noble, T.C. (HM2): Navy Corpsman, H&S Company, attached to Third Platoon, Charlie Company.

Perkins, William T. Jr. (Cpl): Combat Photographer (Motion Picture), attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Mission Hills,

California.

Pelkey, Ronald (GySgt): Company Gunnery Sergeant, Delta Company. From Bath, Maine.

Priddy, Jim: Childhood friend of Bill Perkins. Entered the Marine Corps with Perkins on the “buddy plan”. From Mission Hills, California.

Robinson, Edward M. “Mike” (PFC): Third Platoon Radioman, Charlie Company. From Detroit, Michigan.

Ruffer, Jack A. (First Lieutenant): Platoon Commander, First Platoon, Charlie Company. From San Bernardino, California.

Seymour, Philip A. (Sgt): 60mm Mortar Section Leader, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company. From Brookline, Massachusetts.

Snell, Robert D. “Dan” (LCpl): Assault Section, Weapons Platoon, attached to Second Platoon, Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Charlotte, North Carolina.

Thompson, Thomas (GySgt): Charlie Company Gunnery Sergeant. From Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Thorne, Scott (PFC): Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) Radioman attached to Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Las Vegas, Nevada.

Walton, Roger E. (PFC): 60mm Mortar Section, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company. From East Springfield, New York.

Welsh, David A. (Cpl): Squad leader, Second Squad, First Platoon, Charlie Company. From Springfield, Illinois.

Yates, Edward R. “Rowdy” (Cpl): Second Platoon Radioman, Charlie Company. From Louisville, Kentucky.

Zorn, Joseph J. (LCpl): Assault Section, Weapons Platoon, Charlie Company attached to Second Platoon, Charlie Company on Operation Medina. From Coram, New York.

Glossary

3.5-inch Rocket Launcher: See Rocket Launcher, 3.5-inch.

782 Gear: see Individual Equipment.

Absent Without Leave (AWOL): The act of being AWOL; the subject of a punitive article (Article 86) of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which proscribes unauthorized absence:

> "Any member of the armed forces who, without authority –fails to go to his appointed place of duty at the time prescribed; goes from that place; or absents himself or remains absent from his unit, organization, or place of duty at which he is required to be at the time prescribed; shall be punished as a court-martial may direct."

Agent Orange: An air delivered defoliant used on forested areas of South Vietnam in order to reduce the amount of overhead concealment for enemy ground forces.

Air Strike: Aerial delivery of ordnance on a selected target – see also Close Air Support.

AK47: The standard 7.62mm Kalashnikov assault rifle used by the military of the Warsaw Pact countries and their communist bloc allies including China and North Vietnam.

Amphibious Ready Group: A small task force of three or four amphibious ships and their embarked Battalion Landing Team (Reinforced) of Marines.

Amphibious Reconnaissance School: There were two such schools at the time, one located at Landing Force Training Center, Pacific, Coronado, CA, and the other at Little Creek, VA – both schools screened and prepared Marines to conduct long-distance swims in open seas from small boats, submarines or via helo insertion in order to conduct beach reconnaissance, off-beach reconnaissance and hydrographic surveys to evaluate the suitability of beaches (and their gradients) as sites for potential amphibious landing by Marine or other forces.

Amphibious Warfare School: A six-month long Marine Corps formal school (then located at Quantico) intended for Captains of all MOS's where the curriculum was built around the planning, organizing, and conduct of amphibious and other infantry operations.

Amtrac: Acronym for amphibious tractor.

Armor Support: The use by infantry of tanks and amphibious tractors in support of any ground operation.

Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN): The South Vietnamese Army.

Artillery: Large-caliber weapons, such as cannons or howitzers, that are operated by crews and used to support infantry units/organizations engaged in ground combat or to deny the use of an area to the enemy.

Assault, Frontal: The most basic of offensive tactics – attacking directly at the enemy usually because the terrain permits a rapid advance of the attacking force and is normally conducted in concert with a supporting artillery barrage or a base of high volume machine gun fire.

Aviator, Naval: See Naval Aviator.

Base of Fire: A force that gives support to the advance or attack of other units with its fire.

Basic School, The (TBS): The school at Quantico, VA, (Camp Barrett) where the five to six month course for newly commissioned Second Lieutenants is conducted – all Marine Corps officers who have just graduated from the Naval Academy, Officer Candidates School, Platoon Leaders Class and NROTC attend this school to learn the basics of being a Marine Corps infantry platoon commander.

Battalion (Infantry): An organization normally composed of a Headquarters and Service (H&S) Company and four "letter" companies, e.g. First Battalion – H&S, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta companies (or batteries in an artillery battalion); Second Battalion

H&S, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf and Hotel companies (or batteries in an artillery battalion); Third Battalion – H&S, India, Kilo, Lima and Mike companies (or batteries in an artillery battalion).

Battle Dressing: Large sterile bandages carried in individual first aid kits and by Navy corpsmen in their Unit One(s).

Blocking Force: A stationary force against which other sweeping ground forces push an enemy force in order to trap them between the two.

Boondockers: A combat boot with a shortened leather upper originally issued during WWII and worn with leggings – issued without leggings in the ’50s and early ’60s instead of a second pair of regular, high topped combat boots.

Boot Camp: A euphemism for Marine Corps recruit training.

Bronze Star (with Combat “V”): The Bronze Star Medal is awarded to any person who, while serving in any capacity in the military of the United States distinguishes himself by heroic or meritorious achievement or service, not involving participation in aerial flight, while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States. The Combat “V” or Combat Distinguishing Device, when attached to the ribbon of the medal, denotes those individuals who were awarded the decoration as a result of direct combat with an enemy force.

Buddy Plan: An enlistment incentive that allowed friends to join the Marine Corps together and stay together through basic training.

Bug Juice: Government-issued insect repellent – it came in small, individual, plastic bottles.

C-4: A high quality, very high velocity military plastic explosive.

C-130: The Lockheed C-130 Hercules is a four-engine turboprop aircraft used as the primary tactical airlifter for military forces worldwide capable of landing and taking off from short or unprepared runways, it was used as a troop transport, cargo carrier, aerial refueler and gunship (Spooky) in Vietnam.

C-141: The primary strategic lift aircraft used by the Military Airlift Command during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The C-141 Starlifter was a four engine jet aircraft used for personnel and logistics transport.

C-Ration: Meal, Combat Individual (C-Ration) was the name of the field rations issued to Marines and Navy Hospital corpsmen in Vietnam. The ration consisted of a canned entrée (one of a dozen varieties), canned fruit, a B-2 Unit containing cheese, crackers and candy, and an accessory pack containing a can opener, a mix for a hot beverage, salt and sugar packets, a plastic spoon, chewing gum, a packet of four cigarettes and several sheets of toilet paper.

Camp Geiger: Located near Camp Lejeune, NC, it was the home of the Marine Corps’ east coast Infantry Training Regiment.

Camp Hansen: One of the Marine camps on Okinawa – Camp Hansen was used as a temporary stop for Marines en route to Vietnam and for those Marines who had completed their tour in Vietnam and were headed back to the United States.

Camp Lejeune: Located near Jacksonville, NC, Camp Lejeune (named for Lieutenant General John Archer Lejeune, USMC, the thirteenth Commandant of the Marine Corps) is the historical home of the Second Marine Division.

Camp Pendleton: Located between Oceanside and San Clemente, CA, Camp Pendleton (named for Major General Joseph H, Pendleton, USMC, who long advocated for a west coast base for Marines) is the historical home (since WWII) of the First Marine Division.

Camp San Onofre: Located on the northwest corner of Camp Pendleton, it was the home of the Marine Corps' west coast Infantry Training Regiment.

Candidate: An officer trainee who is undergoing the very rigorous and demanding training, evaluation and screening process at the Marine Corps Officer Candidates School at Quantico, VA – the eleven-week process is designed to determine if the candidate has the requisite moral, intellectual, physical and leadership potential to become a leader of Marines capable of handling the tremendous responsibilities of leading men in combat.

Caribbean Cruise (also known as Carib Cruise): The six-month deployment to the area of the Caribbean Sea by a Marine Battalion Landing Team embarked aboard the vessels of a Navy Amphibious Ready Group.

Chieu Hoi: A Viet Cong or NVA who accepted amnesty in exchange for his surrender. The phrase "Chieu Hoi" is a combination of two verbs "to welcome" and "to return." Those accepting the amnesty were frequently used as scouts (Kit Carson's) to lead U. S. and ARVN forces to enemy supply bases and strongholds.

China Beach: A beach on the East China Sea just east of the city of Da Nang where in country R&R was provided for Marine Corps and other personnel.

Chinese Communist Grenades (Chicom): The general term used for enemy grenades fashioned in the manner of those manufactured by the People's Republic of China (communist China).

Chop Op Con: CHange OPerational CONtrol meaning an organization is removed from the operational control of their parent headquarters and placed under the operational control of another headquarters.

Claymore Mine (M18): A directional fragmentation mine, 8-1/2 inches long, 1-3/8 inches wide, 3-1/4 inches high, and weighing 3-1/2 pounds. The mine contained 700 steel spheres (10.5 grains) and 1-1/2 pound layer of composition C-4 explosive and was initiated by a No. 2 electric blasting cap. The M18 command-detonated mine was employed with obstacles or on the approaches, forward edges, flanks and rear edges of protective minefields as close-in protection against a dismounted infantry attack. The mine propels a fan-shaped pattern of steel balls in a 60-degree horizontal arc with a maximum height of 6.6 feet (2 meters), and has a casualty radius of 328 feet (100 meters).

Close Air Support: Gun/cannon fire, rockets, bombs, and other ordnance delivered in very close proximity to friendly troops by friendly aircraft. Nobody is better at it than Marine aviators who train to be infantry platoon commanders before they attend flight school. Marine close air support was first demonstrated in Nicaragua during the Banana War era and was perfected during WWII and Korea. Close air support is also the reason each Marine Division (First, Second, Third and Fourth*) is supported by a separate Marine Aircraft Wing (First, Second, Third and Fourth*) dedicated to providing fixed-wing and rotary wing (helicopter) aircraft support of ground combat forces.

*The Fourth Marine Division and Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing are the Marine Corps' Reserve.

Close Order Drill: The procedure used to move a unit from one place to another in a standard, orderly manner, while maintaining the best appearance possible and simultaneously teaching or reinforcing discipline by instilling habits of precision and automatic response to orders.

Code of Conduct: The six articles of the Code of Conduct define the serviceman's obligation while serving in combat and enumerate those things he may do or say, and conversely, may not do and may not say, if captured by the enemy.

Color Company (U.S. Naval Academy): Of the thirty-six companies of

Midshipman at the academy in any one year, the color company is the one that demonstrates through the accomplishments of its members that it has no peer in terms of its collective achievements in academics, professional skills and athletics.

Combat Correspondent: Someone whose primary role is to observe combat operations and then record those observations in writing for public release, the historical record, and research purposes.

Combat Photographer: Someone whose primary role is to photograph (still photo or motion picture) combat operations for public release, the historical record, and research purposes.

Command Post (CP): A military headquarters, static or mobile, for a command group and its officers during an operation.

Command-Detonated Explosive: An explosive device, the detonation of which is initiated electronically or by other means by the person who implanted it or by someone acting as that person's agent.

Commissioned Officer: One who has been given a commission by the Congress of the United States to perform certain duties; commissioned officers derive authority directly from the government and, as such, hold a commission charging them with the duties and responsibilities of a specific office or position – commissioned officers are the only persons in the military authorized to exercise command (according to the most technical definition of the word) over a military unit.

Company: A unit comprised of a number of platoons, normally commanded by a captain, and the lowest level at which non-judicial punishment (Article 15 of the UCMJ) can be meted out.

Company Patrol Base: A piece of defensible terrain, normally fortified with earthen berms or sandbags, from which a company-size unit conducts day and night patrols of varying sizes in order to maintain observation or control over a much larger area.

Company Executive Officer (XO): Normally the second senior officer in the company; the second in command of that company.

Communism: The Marxist-Leninist version of communist doctrine that advocates the overthrow of capitalism by the revolution of the proletariat; a system of government in which the state plans and controls the economy and a single, often authoritarian party holds power, claiming to make progress toward a higher social order in

which all goods are equally shared by the people; a theoretical economic system characterized by the collective ownership of property and by the organization of labor for the common advantage of all members; a form of socialism that abolishes private property and favors collectivism in a classless society.

Confidence Course: A series of high obstacles that must be negotiated by the individual Marine – successful completion builds an individual's self-confidence while teaching military skills.

Connecting File: The skirmish line of infantrymen that extends from the main body of a tactical formation to its flank security in order to maintain physical or visual contact.

Con Thien: A reinforced battalion-sized outpost located on a small cluster of hills (518 feet high) just south of the demilitarized zone – Con Thien was also the northwest corner of Leatherneck Square (Dong Ha, Cam Lo and Gio Linh represented the other three corners).

Cover Man: The infantryman, often a machine gunner, positioned immediately behind the point man in a tactical formation.

Daisy Chain: A series of explosive devices connected together by a common initiating device, e.g. detonation cord.

Da Nang: The major city in the I Corps area of South Vietnam – it had a large port, the largest airfield in I Corps and was the home of III MAF, First Marine Division, First Marine Aircraft Wing and Force Logistics Command headquarters.

Dear John Letter: A letter from a girlfriend back home telling her Marine she's found somebody else or is breaking off their relationship for some other reason.

Defense, Platoon: The tactical emplacement of a platoon's men and weaponry on a piece of terrain in order to defend against an enemy attack from the front, the flanks or the rear.

Delayed Entry Program: A program which allowed young men to enlist in the Marine Corps but delay their departure for recruit training for some period of time after enlistment.

Demilitarized Zone (DMZ): An area, usually the frontier or boundary between two or more groups, where military activity is not permitted, usually by treaty or other agreement – often the demilitarized zone lies upon a line of control and forms a de-facto

international border.

Distinguished Flying Cross: A Medal awarded to a member of the United States armed forces who distinguishes himself in combat in support of operations by “heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight”.

Division: Any one of the Marine Corps four infantry commands consisting of a Headquarters Battalion, three infantry Regiments, an Artillery Regiment, a Tank Battalion, Amtrac Battalion, Engineer Battalion, Shore Party Battalion, Reconnaissance Battalion, Motor Transport Battalion, and Medical battalion (1967 T/O).

Dong Ha: Located at the junction of highways 1 (north-south) and 9 (east-west) – Dong Ha was part of four Marine Combat Bases that formed a quadrilateral extending about 12 miles south from the eastern DMZ area to the Cua Viet River at Dong Ha. The quadrilateral was known as “Leatherneck Square” and included Dong Ha, Cam Lo, Con Thien and Gio Lin.

Drill Instructor (DI): The highly selected and highly trained non-commissioned officer or staff non-commissioned officer charged with the basic training of Marine recruits during the recruits’ first three months in the Marine Corps.

Envelopment: A military tactic characterized by feinting an attack to the enemy’s front while actually attacking from either of his flanks, or both flanks (a double envelopment).

Esprit de Corps: A common spirit of comradeship, enthusiasm, and devotion to a cause among the members of the group – the “spirit” of a unit – this spirit is commonly reflected by all members of the group – it implies devotion and loyalty to the Marine Corps, with deep regard for its history, traditions and honor.

Executive Officer (XO): The officer second-in-command at company, battalion, or regimental level (same for Marine aviation squadrons and Marine air groups).

Field Gear: Also known as “782 Gear” (because of the form number of the receipt the Marine signed when the gear was issued) it included items such as the helmet, helmet liner, camouflaged helmet cover, flak jacket, H-harness, equipment belt, canteens, canteen covers, first aid packet, ammo pouches, poncho, poncho liner, haversack, knapsack, entrenching tool, shelter half, bayonet (or KA-

Bar fighting knife for those armed with a pistol instead of a rifle), etc.

Field Medical School (aka Field Med School): After completing Hospital Corps School, corpsmen who were to be assigned to serve with Marines were required to successfully complete "Field Med School" where they learned to perform their first aid and medical treatment functions in a field environment rather than a hospital.

Field Hospital: A large, mobile, expeditionary medical hospital unit (normally housed in tents or tent-like structures) that treats and cares for casualties of war offering many of the same services available in fixed hospitals.

Field of Fire: The area around a weapon (or group of weapons) that can be easily and effectively reached (in terms of range and declination) by gunfire from that (those) weapon(s).

Fighting Hole: A hole dug into the ground (foxhole) and sometimes surrounded by a berm or sandbags which provide some level of protection from direct fire weapons.

Fire Direction Center: Consisting of gunnery and communications personnel and equipment, the Fire Direction Center receives target information and requests for fire, and translates them into appropriate firing solutions (in terms of range, azimuth (also called deflection), propellant charges, ammunition type, fuze settings, etc.) that are passed to the firing batteries for execution.

Fire for Effect: The volume of fire, normally defined in terms of the number of artillery pieces or mortar tubes, duration of fire or the number of rounds, delivered on a specific point or area target in order to achieve the desired effect, e.g. "Battery Six" equals six rounds per each of the six artillery pieces in a battery or thirty-six rounds fired in rapid succession on the same target.

Firefight: The gunfire, normally small arms, exchanged by two opposing units in relatively close proximity to one another.

Fire Team: The smallest of infantry units (three fireteams to a squad) consisting of a Fire Team leader, an automatic rifleman, an assistant automatic rifleman, and a rifleman.

Fire Team Leader: The title of the leader of this smallest of Marine infantry units.

Flak Jacket: A sleeveless jacket holding protective plates of fiberglass bonded with resin that covered the chest, back, and abdomen. The

jacket was designed to limit the damage done to the wearer's torso from the fragmentation produced by small explosives (hand grenades and small millimeter mortar rounds).

Flank: The right or left side of a military or naval formation.

Flank Security: That element of a tactical formation that extends out laterally to the left and the right from the main body to provide early warning of an enemy attack from that area.

Forward Air Controller (FAC): The FAC is normally the senior member of the TACP. An officer and designated Naval Aviator, he is the ground commander's advisor on the use of air assets. Utilizing the UHF communications capability of the TACP, he talks directly to the pilots of supporting aircraft to alert them to wind conditions, and obstacles on the ground. He identifies ground targets and recommends run-in and roll-out headings for attacking aircraft.

Forward Observer (FO): An artilleryman or mortarman who accompanies an infantry unit to the field for the purpose of requesting artillery or mortar fire support and then adjusts the artillery or mortar fire onto the target – he will also plan defensive fire support in advance of actually needing it by plotting "on call" fire missions.

Forward Observer – Artillery (aka Arty FO): That member of an artillery unit who is attached to an infantry unit for the purpose of requesting and adjusting offensive or defensive artillery fire and plotting pre-planned defensive artillery fire.

Forward Observer – Mortars: That mortarman who is attached to an infantry platoon or company for the purpose of requesting and adjusting offensive or defensive mortar fire and plotting pre-planned defensive mortar fire.

Foxhole: See Fighting Hole.

Free-Fire Zone: An area defined by map coordinates or prominent terrain features within which a unit/organization may fire without coordination with adjacent units/organizations and without permission from a higher headquarters.

Friendly Fire: A term used in reference to an attack on friendly forces by other friendly forces, which may be deliberate (e.g. incorrectly identifying the target as the enemy), or accidental (e.g. missing the enemy and hitting "friendlies") – it is also known as blue on blue,

which derives from mapping protocols where friendly forces are depicted on maps in “blue” and enemy forces are depicted in “red” – the term fraticide can be applied if friendly forces are killed by friendly fire.

Galley: A kitchen aboard a naval ship (or the food preparation area of a Marine mess hall).

Grenadier: The member of a Marine rifle squad armed with the M79 40mm grenade launcher.

Grenade (Concussion): A hand grenade packed with a significant amount of explosive and designed to kill through over-pressurization with the expanding gasses of the explosion within an enclosed or confined area, e.g. a tunnel or pill box.

Grenade (Fragmentation): A hand grenade whose serrated body or fragmentation coil is intend to fragment upon detonation and kill or injure with that fragmentation when those fragments impact the soft tissues of the human body.

Grenade Launcher, M79: A Marine rifle squad weapon resembling a short rifle with a very large bore barrel capable of launching a 40mm high explosive grenade out to a maximum of range of 300 meters.

Grunt: A euphemism for infantryman – anyone with an 03_ _ MOS.

Guantanamo Bay: The oldest U.S. Naval base located outside the continental United States, it was initially leased as a coal fueling station on the southeast coast of Cuba in 1903 – the acquisition was subsequently formalized in a treaty ratified that same year.

Guard Duty: Performed at posts and stations around the world – a four hour watch conducted for security purposes.

Guerilla: A member of an irregular force, usually an indigenous military or paramilitary unit operating in small bands in occupied territory, fighting a stronger force by sabotage and harassment.

Guidon Bearer, Platoon: The individual who carries the platoon’s guidon during close order drill training, parades, and ceremonies, including recruit graduations.

Gun Target Line: An imaginary straight line from the gun to the target.

Gung Ho: An abbreviation for the Mandarin Chinese “Gongye Hezhoushe”, the phrase was clipped to the initial characters of the

two words, “gung ho”, which means, “work together” – this clipping became the rallying cry for Marine Lieutenant Colonel Evans Carlson and his Second Marine Raider Battalion early in WWII and by late 1942 was widely adopted throughout the Marine Corps as an expression of spirit, enthusiasm and dedication; a “can do” attitude.

Gunnery Sergeant (Gunny): A staff non-commissioned officer senior to a Staff Sergeant but junior to a First Sergeant or Master Sergeant.

Hai Lang National Forest: A national forest located southwest of Quang Tri and northwest of Hue City in the I Corps area of South Vietnam.

Haiphong Harbor: The major seaport in North Vietnam used by communist bloc shipping throughout the war to deliver munitions to their allies in North Vietnam.

Hammer and Anvil: A tactic where a maneuvering ground force (the hammer) pushes the enemy back into a static ground force or terrain feature (the anvil) in order to surround and destroy the enemy with minimal numbers of enemy escaping the two forces.

Hanoi Hannah: An English-speaking female North Vietnamese radio personality who regularly broadcasted communist propaganda messages over the airwaves to U.S. troops in South Vietnam, much the same as did Axis Sally (Germany) and Tokyo Rose (Japan) during WWII.

Helicopter Support Team (HST): Small groups of Shore Party personnel organized into teams that provide terminal guidance to helicopters landing in a HLZ – they also provide rigging for external lift by helicopters of equipment and supplies to forward areas.

Hippie: A term used to describe the rebellious youth of the 1960s and 1970s who opposed and rejected many of the conventional standards and customs of society, eschewed Western middle class values and advocated extreme liberalism in sociopolitical attitudes and lifestyles; marked by resentment of authority, an advocate of legalized drug use with no limits on the expression of one’s sexuality.

Ho Chi Minh: The charismatic communist political leader of North Vietnam whose goal was the reunification of North and South Vietnam under communist rule.

Hoi An: A Vietnamese city located approximately 25 miles southeast of Da Nang.

Hollywood Marine: An ungenerous reference proffered by MCRD Parris Island-trained Marines about those Marines from the western half of the nation who received their basic training at MCRD San Diego.

Hooch (or Hootch): A makeshift dwelling fashioned from available materials, e.g. ponchos, shelter halves, et al. The term also refers to individual Vietnamese huts in a village.

Horseshoe, The: The name of a company patrol base north of Hoi An named for the geographical feature where it was located – it was on a piece of terrain similar in shape to that of a horseshoe surrounded and outlined by an inland waterway.

Hospital Corps School: The Navy formal school where new Navy corpsmen were given hands-on clinical training in first aid and patient care.

Ia Drang Valley: The Ia Drang Valley is a valley located in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam and was the site on 14 November 1965 where 450 American soldiers of the Army's First Air Cavalry Division were airlifted by helicopter with the intention of locating and eliminating

North Vietnamese forces – the American soldiers were almost immediately surrounded by over 3,000 soldiers of the Peoples Army of Vietnam (NVA) arriving in waves – during this three day engagement, 242 American soldiers and over 1,000 North Vietnamese soldiers were killed.

Illumination Round: An artillery or mortar round packed with a parachute flare that deploys and ignites at a predetermined altitude in order to provide spot or area illumination of the battlefield at night.

In Country: Meaning located in South Vietnam as opposed to supporting the war effort from bases outside of South Vietnam, e.g. Thailand, Guam, Okinawa, The Philippines.

Indian Country: A reference to those geographical areas where the probability of coming in contact with armed Viet Cong or NVA was very high.

Indirect Fire: The use of artillery or mortars to fire at targets out of the crew's line of sight, by firing in a high arc or angle out to long distances and/or over high terrain.

Individual Equipment: Also known as 782 Gear because of the Government Form Number for the receipt each Marine signed to signify his acceptance of responsibility for those items that were listed and checked off on the form. The equipment consisted of the field gear the Marine used in field training and combat.

Infantry Training Regiment (ITR): Located at Camp San Onofre for Marines graduating from recruit training at MCRD San Diego and at Camp Geiger for those Marines graduating from recruit training at MCRD Parris Island; Marines were introduced to crew-served weapons, map and compass reading, use of grenades and other explosives and numerous other basic infantry skills while participating in this four to six week training course.

Infantryman: One who serves in the infantry (as opposed to artillery, tanks or other military occupational specialty fields).

Island, The: A platoon patrol base (located in GS 1757 of map sheet 7014-6640-1) just northeast of Hoi An and separated from the surrounding area by a river.

Judge Advocate General (JAG): The judicial arm of the United States armed forces, consisting of autonomous departments within the Marine Corps, Navy, Army and Air Force – JAG is charged with the defense and prosecution of military law as provided in the Uniform Code of Military Justice – JAG officers also support military combat operations by advising commanders on the law of armed conflict.

Jungle Kit: Euphemism for the individual first aid kit.

Jungle Rot: A skin disorder induced by the tropical climate of South Vietnam; also known as creeping crud; immersion foot as it applied to the feet; also small cuts and scratches that quickly became infected.

Jungle Training: Training conducted in the jungle (Panama or The Philippines) – the jungle is a very different environment than that where most Marines were trained and represented challenges in terms of terrain and land navigation, visibility, tactics, insects, reptiles, river crossings, etc.

Jungle Utilities: The Marine's combat or field uniform (called BDU's or fatigues in the Army).

KA-Bar: The standard Marine fighting knife issued to those for whom the .45 caliber pistol was the T/O weapon.

Khe Sanh: A reinforced regimental outpost located in northwest South Vietnam just below the DMZ. Khe Sanh was one of the most remote outposts in Vietnam.

Kin Village: The Okinawan village just outside the confines of Camp Hansen.

Landing Zone (LZ): An area of ground suitable for the landing of a helicopter or large numbers of helicopters.

Leave: A period of authorized absence. Each servicemember is entitled to thirty days leave each year. Thirty days may appear to be a very generous amount of time away from duty but servicemembers (particularly those in combat) have little, if any, time off - there are long deployments, frequent 24-hour workdays, seven-day work-weeks, and there is no such thing as overtime pay in the military.

Legion of Merit: The Legion of Merit is awarded to members of the Armed Forces of the United States for exceptionally outstanding conduct in the performance of meritorious service to the United States.

Light Antitank Assault Weapon (LAAW): The LAAW, weighing only 5.2 lbs, was designed as a discardable one-man 66mm rocket launcher used primarily as an anti-tank weapon – in Vietnam however, the LAAW was used almost exclusively as a bunker buster or for attacking entrenched enemies.

Listening Post (LP): Positions manned by one or more Marines at night and located outside friendly lines near likely avenues of approach in order to provide early warning of enemy movement/approach.

Lifer: Someone who elected to make the Marine Corps their career, not just a four-year enlistment.

LKA: Amphibious Cargo Ships designed to sail to the site of amphibious operations carrying equipment, cargo, and a limited number of assault troops. LKAs offloaded their equipment, cargo and troops onto the ships' landing crafts. The crafts would then ferry the equipment, cargo and troops ashore in support of an amphibious invasion.

Lock-on Training: A period of prescribed training (approximately four months in duration) which began with fireteam tactics and weapons employment and progressed through squad, platoon,

company and battalion tactics, weapons employment, supporting arms usage and communications in day and night combat, both offensive and defensive, in order to train the unit/organization as a complete team.

LPA: Amphibious Transport ships designed to sail to the site of amphibious operations carrying up to 1,500 assault troops and some of their support equipment. The LPA disembarked troops with the ships own landing craft. The ship would then stand off the beachhead ready to evacuate troops, casualties, and prisoners of war. In order to carry out its primary mission LPAs had to provide all facilities for the embarked troops including, berthing, messing, medical and dental care, and recreational facilities.

M14: A 7.62mm rifle that was standard issue prior to the adoption of the M16 rifle.

M16: The 5.56mm rifle that became standard issue in Vietnam in the latter part of 1967.

M60 Machine Gun: A lightweight, air-cooled, disintegrating metallic link-belt fed, portable or tripod/bipod mounted 7.62mm machine gun with an effective range of 1200 yards, a cyclic rate of 550 rounds per minute, and a maximum sustained rate of fire of 100 rounds per minute.

Magazine (ammunition): The ammunition accessory to a weapon (.45 cal pistol, M14, M16). A spring inside the magazine forces a round upward into the weapon's receiver. Once in the receiver, a round is pushed by the bolt into the chamber for firing. After firing, the same bolt extracts the round where it is ejected from the receiver. In Vietnam, the magazine for an M16 held twenty rounds.

Marine Corps: Short for United States Marine Corps.

Marine Corps Air Station El Toro: MCAS El Toro, CA, was home to the Third Marine Corps Aircraft Wing and also served as an aerial port of embarkation for many Marines en route to Vietnam via Okinawa.

Marine Reserves: The Reserve component of the United States Marine Corps consisting of a Marine Division and a Marine Air Wing. Members of the Reserve are initially trained on active duty for a period of six months (longer for technical personnel and officers), before they are released to their reserve units where they train one

weekend per month and two weeks each summer for the remainder of their obligated service. They are subject to recall to active duty at the discretion of the National Command Authority.

MCRD Parris Island: The Marine Corps Recruit Depot located on the east coast in South Carolina. All Marine recruits who live east of the Mississippi river attend MCRD Parris Island.

MCRD San Diego: The Marine Corps Recruit Depot located on the west coast in Southern California. All Marine recruits who live west of the Mississippi river attend MCRD San Diego.

Medal of Honor: The Medal of Honor is the highest award for valor in action against an enemy force that can be bestowed upon an individual serving in the Armed Services of the United States. Generally presented to its recipient by the President of the United States of America in the name of Congress, it is often called the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Medevac: The term used for medical evacuation from the field to a field hospital or hospital ship – in Vietnam, this was most often accomplished via a helicopter.

Mediterranean Cruise (also known as Med Cruise): The six-month deployment to the Mediterranean Sea by a Marine Battalion Landing Team (Reinforced) embarked aboard the vessels of a Navy Amphibious Ready Group.

Mess Duty: A temporary assignment of usually thirty days or less per year where a Marine of junior rank and any MOS serves in a galley, a mess hall or field environment to assist in the preparation and serving of meals to the rest of the unit/organization.

Midshipmen (Naval Academy): An undergraduate officer cadet – the word midshipman derives from the part of ship between the bow and the stern, “amidships,” which was their traditional station at sea.

Military Occupational Specialty (MOS): A four digit number designating a specific military skill e.g. 0100 = administration; 0200 = intelligence; 0300 = basic infantryman; 0301 = basic infantry officer; 0302 =infantry officer; 0311 = rifleman; 0400 = logistics; 0800 = artillery; 1800 = tanks; 2500 = communications, etc.

Monsoon: A wind from the southwest or south that brings heavy rainfall to southern Asia in the summer.

Mortars: Crew-served weapons employed at the company level

(60mm Mortar) and battalion level (81mm Mortar) used to fire high explosive, white phosphorous and illumination rounds at a high angle trajectory out to a maximum of 4600 yards. 4.2-inch mortars were also used by some artillery units in Vietnam.

Mud Flats, The: A company patrol base located west of Hoi An and characterized by clay soil that did not drain readily after rain, hence its name.

Mustang: Any Marine Corps officer with prior enlisted service; primarily an officer who rose through the ranks as an enlisted man and was selected to attend Officer Candidates School because of his demonstrated intellect and leadership ability.

NVA: Abbreviation for North Vietnamese Army.

Naval Academy: Short for the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, MD.

Naval Aviator: A Marine or Naval officer is designated a Naval Aviator upon successful completion of flight training which includes landing on aircraft carriers underway at sea.

Navy Corpsman: Trained Navy enlisted male and female medical personnel who provide first aid and medical treatment to sailors and Marines. Those serving with Marines in the field must be male and must also complete Field Medical School to learn how to perform their medical treatment function in a field combat environment.

Navy Commendation Medal: Awarded to members of the Navy or Marine Corps who distinguish themselves by heroic action, outstanding achievement, or meritorious service – the Navy Commendation Medal falls between the Bronze Star Medal and the Navy & Marine Corps Achievement Medal in terms of precedence.

Navy Cross: The nation's second highest award for valor (along with the Army's Distinguished Service Cross and Air Force Cross), is awarded for extraordinary heroism while engaged in combat – the Navy Cross falls between the Medal of Honor and the Silver Star Medal in terms of precedence.

Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO): A Corporal or Sergeant in the Marine Corps charged with the exercise of leadership of other lower enlisted personnel.

Norton Air Force Base: Located in San Bernardino, CA, Norton served as an aerial port of embarkation for most of the Marines en

route to Vietnam via Okinawa as well as for servicemen from other branches of the armed forces.

Observation Post (OP): One or more positions normally manned during daylight hours by one or more Marines and located on terrain that affords excellent fields of observation in order to provide early warning of enemy movement/approach.

Obstacle Course: A 100-meter long series of obstacles that must be negotiated by the individual Marine in a prescribed amount of time in order to successfully complete the course.

Officer Candidates School (OCS): Located at Quantico, VA, OCS is where the Marine Corps screens and trains most of its future officers.

Okinawa: The largest of the Ryukyu Islands at the edge of the East China Sea, and the Pacific Ocean, some 350 miles southwest of the Japanese Island of Kyushu and historical home of the Third Marine Division where many Marines en route to Vietnam paused a few days to update vaccinations and store uniform items that would not be needed in Vietnam – also used as a temporary stop on the way back from Vietnam that allowed time to decompress and readjust to life outside of a combat zone.

Operations Officer: The officer of a battalion, regimental or division staff responsible for planning, organizing and coordinating the training and the combat operations of that organization/command.

Ordnance: Military supplies, particularly weapons, ammunition, etc.

Parris Island: see MCRD Parris Island.

Patrol: Tactical movement through an area by a squad, platoon or company in an effort to gain information, to locate or make contact with the enemy.

Physical Conditioning Platoon (Special Training Branch): A platoon within the Special Training Branch, a part of the Recruit Training Regiment, where recruits who are not performing at an acceptable level physically are temporarily assigned (a few weeks to several months) to build strength and endurance so that they can return to a regular recruit platoon to successfully complete the remainder of their training.

Physical Training (PT): Any physical activity involving calisthenics, aerobic exercise, long distance running, negotiating the obstacle course or confidence course.

Platoon: A small unit, usually infantry, led by a Lieutenant, and consisting of three squads and a small command & communications structure.

Perimeter: The distance around a given two-dimensional object – tactically speaking, the trace of a defensive line.

Perimeter Defense: A defense without an exposed flank, consisting of forces deployed along or around the perimeter of the defended area.

Platoon Commander: The officer who leads a platoon, aka platoon leader.

Platoon Guide: The NCO, junior to the Platoon Sergeant but senior to the squad leaders, who draws and distributes the logistic support needed by the platoon when in the field or garrison.

Platoon Honor Man: The recruit who graduates with the highest academic, physical fitness, marksmanship, and leadership grades in his platoon.

Platoon Patrol Base (PPB): A small piece of defensible terrain, normally fortified with earthen berms or sandbags, from which a platoon-size unit conducts day and night patrols of varying sizes in order to maintain observation or control over a much larger area.

Platoon Sergeant: The senior enlisted man (normally a SNCO) in a Platoon; the senior enlisted assistant to the Platoon Commander.

Point: The point man or point element of men providing security and/or early warning at the head of a tactical formation.

Point Man: The individual providing security and/or early warning at the head of a tactical formation.

Popular Forces: South Vietnamese National Guard-type local military units.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): A psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience of life-threatening events such as military combat – people who suffer from PTSD often relive the experience through nightmares and flashbacks, have difficulty sleeping, and feel detached or estranged, and these symptoms can be severe enough and last long enough to significantly impair the person's daily life – PTSD is marked by clear biological changes as well as psychological symptoms and frequently occurs in conjunction with related disorders such as depression, substance abuse, problems of memory and cognition, and other problems of physical

and mental health – the disorder is also associated with impairment of the person's ability to function in social or family life, including occupational instability, marital problems and divorces, family discord, and difficulties in parenting.

Puff (Douglas AC-47 Gunship): An Air Force aircraft mounted with three Gatling guns on the port side, each of the guns (aka "mini-guns") capable of firing 100 rounds per second – that's 6,000 rounds per minute PER GUN – Puff was the forerunner of the larger Lockheed AC-130 Spectre Gunships known in Vietnam as Spooky.

Purple Heart: The medal awarded in the name of the President of the United States to any member of the Armed Forces of the United States who, while serving in combat, has been killed or wounded by enemy action.

PX: Abbreviation for Post Exchange, a retail outlet aboard a military base where uniform and sundry items could be purchased. Quang Tin Province: Located 23 miles NW of Chu Lai in the Phuoc Ha and Que Son Valleys.

Quang Tri Province: The northernmost of South Vietnam's provinces.

Quantico: The educational home of the Marine Corps – located in northern Virginia, it is the home of the Marine Corps' Officer Candidates School, The Basic School, Amphibious Warfare School, Marine Corps Command & Staff College, et al – also the home of the FBI Academy.

Quinceañera: In Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban and South American culture, the traditional celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday.

Quonset Hut: A lightweight prefabricated structure of corrugated steel having a semicircular cross section – its components could be shipped anywhere in the world and assembled without skilled labor.

R&R: Rest and Recuperation, Rest and Recreation, Rest and Relaxation, terms used by the U.S. military for the one-week vacations given to members of the armed forces serving in combat areas.

R&R (In Country): A brief respite from combat (two to three days) taken in areas within theater not prone to enemy attack, e.g. a beach in a rear area.

Radio Watch: A period of duty (normally two to four hours) where a

Marine listens to the unit's radio receiver/transmitter for incoming radio traffic, records those messages and sends responses to those messages or other sitreps/spotreps as directed by the duty officer or commanding officer.

Radioman (Company, Platoon, Squad): A Marine whose primary function is to carry and operate the unit's receiving and transmitting radio, monitor the unit's tactical radio net, record radio transmissions in his message book and send messages as directed by his officer-in- charge.

Rear Guard: The element of troops that protects the rear of a tactical military formation.

Recon: The act of conducting a physical reconnaissance of a geographical area or a reference to a reconnaissance team, company, or battalion.

Reconnaissance: The act of inspecting or exploring a geographical area, especially one made to gather military information/intelligence in preparation for an offensive operation.

Reconnaissance Battalion: Composed of four "lettered" reconnaissance companies and a headquarters and service company, the reconnaissance battalion's primary mission was to conduct clandestine surveillance and intelligence gathering along with occasional limited scale raids in support of the Division.

Regional Force (RF): South Vietnamese militia units organized within each district in South Vietnam to engage in offensive operations against local Viet Cong forces – RF units were better paid and equipped than PF units and could be assigned duties anywhere within their home district.

Reverse Slope Defense: A reverse slope defense is characterized by the location of defensive forces on a slope of a hill, ridge, or mountain that descends away from the enemy thereby providing cover from the enemy's direct fire weapons while it exposes (in silhouette) the attacker's lead elements to the defender's defensive fires as the attackers crest the hill in the attack toward the defender's reverse slope position.

Rifle Company: Comprised of three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon (a total of 6 officers; 210 enlisted men) – there were four of these "lettered" rifle companies per battalion.

Recoilless Rifle, 106mm: A long barreled, jeep, mechanical mule or Ontos mounted-weapon that fired a high explosive anti-tank projectile; there was no recoil because the propellant gases were exhausted to the rear from the breach simultaneously with the firing of the weapon; one could be killed simply by standing behind the weapon when it was fired.

Recruit: An individual undergoing Marine Corps basic training; a recruit is not called a Marine until he has successfully completed the training and earned the title and the cherished eagle, globe and anchor, the official emblem of the United States Marine Corps.

Regiment: A training, infantry, or artillery organization normally composed of three battalions and a headquarters company.

Reserves, Marine: See Marine Reserves.

Rifleman: Every Marine is trained as a rifleman before being assigned an MOS, and in combat, every Marine can be called upon to act as a rifleman when needed – also the billet title for one of the four members of a fireteam.

Rocket Launcher, 3.5-inch: There were six of these anti-tank, bunker- busting rocket launchers in the weapons platoon of each rifle company; an earlier generation of this weapon (the 2.75-inch "Bazooka") was used by infantry units during WWII and Korea.

Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG): A hand-held, shoulder-launched anti-tank weapon capable of firing an unguided rocket containing an explosive warhead. Due to advances in armor design, requiring more precise aiming to hit weak spots, most modern tanks were largely immune to unguided anti-tank weapons – RPGs were very effective against light-skinned vehicles or unarmored wheeled vehicles, as well as against buildings and bunkers; the term is most often applied to the Soviet model RPG-7.

Rocket Squad: Composed of two three-man assault rocket teams and a squad leader, there were three such squads in each weapons platoon, one squad normally attached to each of the three rifle platoons.

Rockets: A reference to the 3.5-inch M20A1B1 Rocket Launcher; also the short reference to the team, squad, or section employing such weapons.

Rules of Engagement: Directives issued by competent military

authority which delineate the circumstances and limitations under which United States forces will initiate and/or continue combat engagement with other forces encountered; such rules, both general and specific, dictate when, where and how force shall be used.

Salt: Short for “old salt” or someone who’d been around for a while– someone with a longer period of active service than others in the unit.

Sampan: A flatbottom Asian skiff usually propelled by sail or one or more oars.

San Diego: See MCRD San Diego.

Sand Dunes, The: A company patrol base located north of Hoi An and named for the terrain where it was located.

Sapper: An enemy soldier or para-militaryman who lays mines or booby-traps.

Scout/Sniper: Also see sniper – one who employs camouflage, reconnaissance, stalking techniques, and long-range marksmanship skills in order to acquire and kill enemy personnel at great distances (thereby demoralizing/disheartening any enemy personnel who observe or learn about the incident).

School Yellow: The school solution (the correct or best answer) to a tactical problem at The Basic School or Amphibious Warfare School was always printed on yellow paper and provided to students after they had attempted to apply their own solutions.

Scorpion: A euphemism for a fireteam or squad-size ambush set up outside of friendly lines at night to thwart or deter enemy movement through one’s area of responsibility.

Sea Bag: A cylinder-shaped, tall canvas bag used to transport one’s uniforms and personal items from duty station to duty station.

Seabees: The members of one of the Naval Construction Battalions that build naval aviation bases and shore facilities in an amphibious objective area once the area has been secured by Marines.

Search and Destroy: A military strategy that came into use during the Vietnam War because it seemed to be ideally suited for guerilla/jungle warfare – the insertion of ground forces into hostile territory to locate and destroy enemy forces and then withdrawn immediately afterwards.

Section Leader: The NCO in charge of a crew-served weapons section, e.g. machine guns, mortars, assault, etc.

Semper Fidelis: The Marine Corps motto; Latin for Always Faithful.

Sergeant Instructor: Performs the same function at Officer Candidates School as Drill Instructors do at the two Marine Corps Recruit Depots.

Shrapnel: Fragments from an exploding artillery or mortar shell, grenade, bomb, or mine.

Silver Star: The nation's third highest award for valor (gallantry and intrepidity in action) against an armed enemy in combat – the Silver Star falls between the Navy Cross and the Bronze Star in terms of precedence.

Situation Report: Periodic reports (normally hourly) submitted to higher headquarters via radio that address what has transpired in the past hour that did not require immediate action.

Six-By: The short title for the M35A2 6 x 6, 2½-ton cargo truck.

Small Arms Fire: That gunfire produced by small arms, e.g. rifles and machine guns.

Sniper: A highly trained and skilled expert military shooter whose job is to spot and shoot enemy soldiers at a great distance while remaining concealed in a well-camouflaged shooting position.

Sniper Platoon: A small platoon of expert marksmen located at the regimental level, members of which were routinely attached to the regiment's subordinate battalions during combat operations.

Speed Reaction Course: The course consisted of a series of 20 problem- solving exercises, each contained in a walled-off area the size of a racquetball court; the Speed Reaction Course evaluated an individual's ability to guide a small group in the solution of a difficult problem in an uncertain environment; solving the problem was secondary to how the leader demonstrated an understanding of sound leadership principles while executing the task – one particularly difficult exercise, for example, required student teams to transport a 55-gallon drum across a twelve-foot river using only 3 wooden planks, none of which was long enough to reach the other side – key learning points were the importance of quick thinking and decisiveness in time sensitive situations, as well as flexibility and risk-taking when operating in an uncertain environment.

Spooky (Lockheed AC-130 Spectre Gunship): Spooky had the same mission as Puff, but was a newer, larger, faster Air Force aircraft mounted with four General Electric MXU-470 7.62mm miniguns and four 20mm GE M-61 Gatling guns.

Spot Report (SpotRep): A report submitted to higher headquarters that addresses something of significance that is time sensitive and can't wait for the hourly Situation Report.

Staff Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO): An enlisted member of the Marine Corps, (Staff Sergeant through Sergeant Major) – a position of leadership over NCOs and other enlisted personnel.

Staging Area: An area where forces are brought together immediately prior to being tactically deployed.

Strategy: The science and art of using all the forces of a nation to execute approved plans as effectively as possible during peace or war; also the science and art of military command as applied to the overall planning and conduct of large-scale combat operations.

Stokes Litter: A stretcher manufactured with steel netting and steel frame that is designed to hold an injured or wounded individual to be lifted by wire from the ground to a hovering helicopter when no safe landing zone is immediately available.

Supporting Arms: Assets used to deliver high explosive and/or high volume firepower, e.g. aircraft, artillery, naval gunfire.

Squad: A small infantry unit composed of a squad leader, a grenadier and three four-man fireteams; also the small unit tasked with the tactical employment of two teams of crew-served weapons, e.g. machine guns, rocket launchers.

Squad Leader: The individual responsible for the tactical employment of three infantry fireteams or two crew-served weapons teams; an infantry small unit leader.

Sweep: An infantry tactic of moving through an area across a broad front in order to locate and clear it of opposing forces.

Table of Equipment (T/E): A listing of the equipment and weaponry required by a unit, organization, or command in order to perform their function.

Table of Organization (T/O): A graphic depiction of the various components which make up a unit (platoon or company), organization (battalion or regiment), or command (Division)

delineating the numbers of personnel necessary to fill all the billets in that unit, organization, or command and the individual and crew-served weapons with which they are armed.

Tactical Air Control Party: Consisting of a Naval Aviator (an officer pilot/Forward Air Controller) and his supporting radio operators for the tactical air request high frequency (HF) net radio, the tactical very high frequency (VHF) radio net of the supported unit/organization, and the tactical air control ultra high frequency (UHF) radio net which permits him to talk with fixed-wing or rotary-wing aircraft overhead or en route to provide the requested air support.

Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR): A geographical area delineated on a map by grid coordinates or easily recognized physical terrain features, e.g. rivers, hill tops, ridge lines, tree lines, or a combination of these within which one's unit or organization was responsible – in size it was appropriate to the size of one's organization/unit and the resources an organization/unit had to cover it – no friendly forces entered or fired into your TAOR without your unit's or organization's approval.

Tactics: The military science that deals with securing objectives set by strategy, especially the technique of deploying and directing troops, ships, and aircraft in effective maneuvers against an enemy.

Tour of Duty: That time spent away from the United States while in Vietnam (thirteen months for Marines – twelve months or less for the other services) – it ended with the arrival of one's RTD or Rotation Tour Date when one had completed his thirteen months and it was time to return to the United States.

Tracer: A small arms projectile, e.g. a bullet, which was manufactured with a colored phosphorous coating so that its trajectory once fired can be observed by the gunner to more effectively adjust his rounds on target.

UH-34: The medium lift Sikorsky helicopter used by most Marine Medium Helicopter squadrons during this period for troop lift, logistics re-supply and medevacs.

Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ): A Federal law enacted by Congress under which military justice is administered to members of the armed forces, e.g. non-judicial punishment, summary courts-

martial, special courts-martial, general courts-martial.

Unit One: The designation of the Navy corpsman's medical kit containing first aid supplies and some surgical instruments.

United States Marine Corps (USMC): "America's 9-1-1 Force"; one of the two co-equal branches of the military within the Department of the Navy. "On November 10, 1775, the Continental Congress authorized the raising of two battalions of American Marines, 'particular care be taken that no person be appointed to office or inlisted into said Battalions, but such as are good seamen, or so acquainted with maritime affairs as to be able to serve to advantage by sea,' thereby creating the legendary institution today known as the United States Marine Corps. From the Nation's birth to the present day, the Marines represent a proud culture of service and contribution in defense of the values and freedoms at the heart of the American experience."

USO: Abbreviation for the United Service's Organization, a volunteer organization chartered by Congress as a non-profit charitable corporation to provide morale, welfare and recreation-type services to uniformed military personnel.

Utilities: The Marine field or combat uniform.

Vietnam (aka South Vietnam): A country in Southeast Asia bordered by Cambodia, Laos, North Vietnam and the South China Sea.

Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry: Awarded by the Government of South Vietnam to both individuals and to units that had accomplished deeds of valor or displayed heroic conduct while fighting an enemy force – issued in four degrees, with a basic medal followed by higher degrees which were the equivalent of personal citations on an organizational level.

Viet Cong (VC): Also known as the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam or the National Liberation Front (NLF), the Viet Cong were the primary rebel (guerilla) organization, independent of the NVA, fighting the U.S.-backed Republic of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Weapons Platoon: In the Marine Corps, each rifle company was composed of three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon. The weapons platoon provided the crew-served weapons and gunners (machine guns, mortars and bunker busting rockets) to the other

three platoons which were armed only with rifles, pistols, and grenade launchers.

Wedge Formation: A tactical formation best characterized as an inverted “V” that facilitates substantial firepower to the front as well as to the flanks and is relatively easy to control.

WestPac: The abbreviation for Western Pacific (the larger geographic area where Vietnam was located).

Wet-Net Training: The act of climbing down a grid of vertical and horizontal rope suspended from the side of an amphibious transport or other ship at sea onto smaller landing craft in practice for amphibious landings.

White Phosphorous (Willy Peter): An incendiary agent, smoke-screening and anti-personnel compound that can be delivered via hand grenades, mortar and artillery rounds and is capable of causing serious burns often used to identify targets for attack by close air support aircraft.

Author's Note

In the summer of 2002, I embarked on a mission that had been a goal of mine for many years. That mission was to write about a group of American servicemen who fought for our country. I was naturally drawn to WWII as a subject. I had read numerous accounts of how America led the effort to defeat the twin evils of Hitler's Germany and Tojo's Japan.

A visit to a local bookstore, however, opened my eyes to two realities: 1) many books have been written about the heroes of WWII; 2) few books have been written about the heroes of the Vietnam War. The reasons for this discrepancy were obvious to me. Conventional wisdom tells us that the men and women of WWII were heroes who won our last great war. The deeds of our heroes should be recorded for posterity. Conventional wisdom is correct.

Yet, that same "wisdom" has two faces. The men of WWII were treated as heroes. The men of the Vietnam War were not. Instead of receiving ticker tape parades, many were greeted with shouts of "baby killer" and "war monger". Thrown tomatoes, rocks, profanities and,in some cases, being spat on by fellow Americans was a common occurrence. That "wisdom" tells us that the men and women who fought in Vietnam were not heroes. They fought an immoral war, a war which they did not "win". Not only were they immoral, they were losers as well.

The conventional wisdom about the men and women who fought in Vietnam could not be more wrong. The heroes of Vietnam fought for the same reasons as every other American in every other war: for freedom, for country, for family and for the buddy holding the line next to him.

That visit to the bookstore opened my eyes. My mission was crystal clear: I was to write a book about the heroes of the Vietnam War. That book was to tell a true account of combat, an account that had been ignored by historians up to that point. I wanted to tell a story that might be lost to posterity forever but for my efforts. The book was to set the record of "conventional wisdom" straight for good: that the men and women of Vietnam were and are heroes who won the war they were told to fight. That, as heroes, their deeds should be recorded for posterity. Conventional wisdom should get it right.

Lions of Medina is a true account of Marine courage at its best.

Courage in the face of overwhelming odds. Courage that defined the generation of men and women who fought in Vietnam. This book is a tribute to those who fought the Vietnam War, a reminder that freedom is never free, and a testament to the valor of the American soul.

Doyle D. Glass May, 2007

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Doyle D. Glass May, 2007

End Notes

Chapter Four

1 Major Marshall Carter, To Kill or Capture (Marine Corps Gazette, June 1973) 31; Citation for the Navy Cross awarded to Captain Marshall Carter. (Chap 1)

Chapter 10

2 SSgt Bruce Martin, *Let's Go Charlie*, (*Leatherneck* Magazine of the Marines, February, 1968) Chap 2)

3 SSgt Bruce Martin, *Let's Go Charlie*, (*Leatherneck* Magazine of the Marines, February, 1968)

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Index

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, 3
A-gunner, 97, 155
A-4 Skyhawk, 286
ABC squad, 39, 115-6, 198, 262, 264, 308, 310-1
Absent Without Leave (AWOL), 16, 316
Accardi, Kristi, 40, 271, 348
Agent Orange, 119, 288-9, 316
AH-16 hospital ship, 162, 247, 256-7, 334
Air Force, 7-8, 43, 111-2, 234, 281, 331, 335-6, 338
air strike, 84, 93, 187, 316
air support, 25, 28, 43, 131-2, 316, 320, 345, 347
airfield, 57, 118, 261, 323
airstrip, 118-9
AK47, p. 66, 149, 154, 166, 173, 191, 193, 200-1, 204-6, 212, 235-6, 316
Alabama, 66,
  Birmingham, 107
Alpha Company, First Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, 57, 69, 95-6, 111, 124
ambush, 8, 47, 57, 59, 64, 67-8, 78, 80-1, 89, 91, 95, 118-9, 125, 136, 143-9, 151-4, 156-9, 162-3, 166-9, 185, 203, 209-10, 217-8, 227, 229, 232-3, 235-7, 239, 255, 257-8, 261, 265, 284, 290, 299, 342
American Legion, 307
ammunition
  carrier, 116
  supply point, 126
Amphibious
  Assaults, 37, 91
  Landing, 316, 347
  Objective, 339
  Ships, 316, 332
  Ready Group, 36, 114, 316, 320, 334
  Reconnaissance School, 42, 316
  Warfare School, 278, 337, 339, 342

amtrac, 29, 91, 317, 324
Anderson,
April, 306
Jeff, 306
Mark T. (LCpl), 4-5, 10, 13, 16-17, 28, 36-7, 46-7, 68-70, 79-80, 127, 130-1, 135-7, 143, 151, 153, 157, 167, 179-80, 217-18, 231, 233, 248, 255, 276, 281-2, 291, 310, 348
Patty, 306
Anderson,
Jane, 4
Robert A. (Second Lieutenant), 4-6, 19, 26-7, 44, 46, 107, 124, 305, 310, 348
aneurysm, 290
Antal, Dennis J. (LCpl), 11, 18, 36, 39-40, 45-6, 115-6, 130, 135, 136,145, 148-50, 157-8, 171, 173, 176, 187, 190, 197-200, 202, 214-5, 223, 225-6, 229-30, 256, 259, 262, 264-5, 280-1, 292, 306, 310-1, 348
anti-tank assault man, 28
anti-war
activities, 19
demonstrations, 128, 293
movement, 283
protester(s), 267-8, 275, 279, 280, 283, 290, 306
sentiment, 275, 279, 295
Apple Computer, 305
Arkansas, 39, 313
Hot Springs, 97
Armor Support, 25, 317
Army Air Corps, 6, 11, 111
Army Motion Picture School, 37
Army, United States, 4, 6, 8-11, 36-7, 67, 111-2, 127, 129, 276, 330-1, 335
Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), 81, 97, 123-4, 146, 254, 317, 320
airborne, 254
artery
femoral, 242, 245, 247

artillery
  dud, 81-2, 98, 101
  fire, 43, 118, 241, 255
  interdictory, 255
  missions, 90
  105mm, 82, 101
  round(s), 29, 82, 241, 244, 347
  supporting arms, 25, 43, 93, 168, 179, 216, 254, 332, 344
  unit, 241, 263, 326, 335
assault,
  frontal, 25
  section leader, 116
  squad leader, 116, 310
atrocities, 60
Auburn University, 65
Austgen, Donald R. (Captain), 20

B-52, p. 129
Baer, Glenn (Pvt), 101
Baez, Joan, 275
Balboa Naval Hospital, San Diego, 32
bandage(s) 31, 72, 83, 100, 132, 155-6, 170, 193, 217, 226, 229, 237, 242, 245-8, 318
bandolier(s), 132, 151, 223
banana clip(s), 236
banana leaves, 155
Banana War, 320
barracks, 15, 21, 29-30, 38, 60, 96
Barrier Island, 90-1, 95
Base Area 101, p. 123-4, 253
Base
  camp, 254
  of fire, 151, 317

Basic School, The (TBS), 25-6, 32, 39, 42-44, 105, 196, 260, 317, 339, 342

Battalion
Aid Station, 44, 72-3
Commander, 88, 90-1, 106-7, 143, 145, 203, 224, 255, 258, 310
First Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, 3, 46-9, 51-2, 63, 73, 105-6, 310, 312, 314
Headquarters (First Battalion), 58, 63, 106, 144
officer, 246, 279
Second Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, 123, 125-6
surgeon, 166

Battle
dressing, 31, 92, 106, 132, 151, 154, 215, 256, 318
zone, 186, 211, 224
battlefield, 44, 63, 167, 173-4, 195, 197, 211, 219, 221-6, 231-2, 247, 255, 296, 330
Baumgartner, Anthony (Cpl), 52, 154
bayonet(s), 17, 131-2, 204, 324
Bazaco, Richard, 82-3
bazooka, 39, 154, 341
Bazulto
Cecilia (Hamamoto), 53, 268, 299, 312, 348
Salvador (Sgt), 3-4, 10, 53, 176, 201, 217, 222-3, 268, 299,
Salvador III, 299

Befumo
John, 268, 300, 348
Pauline Brothers, 300, 348

beer, 40, 48, 51, 77, 96, 115, 266, 278
Belbusti, Albert F (LtCol), 105-7, 124, 126, 136, 141, 143-5, 153, 167, 203, 224-5, 227, 232, 238-9, 242-4, 247-8, 251, 255, 261, 306, 310, 348

Bell
Annie Mae, 61
Minnie Mae, 4, 348
Oliver Jr. (Pvt), 4, 6, 61, 237, 271, 300, 310,

Bell, Van D., Jr. (Col) (“Ding Dong”), 87

Ben Hai River, 118
Bentley, Cobbie James (Cpl), 107
Bethesda Naval Hospital, 290
Betts, Sherman (Cpl), 171
Bice
  Betty, 38, 269, 301, 348
  Carolyn, 5
  Quinton Morgan (Cpl), 5-6, 38, 61, 115, 207, 213-4, 234-5, 237, 269, 277, 296-7, 301, 308, 310, 313, 348
Biggers, Lewis (PFC), 261
Ban Lanh 2, 61
bivouac, 118
Black Sheep, 286
Blankenship, Lee, 288
Blessing, William S. (PFC), 3, 6, 12, 15, 21, 40, 46, 60, 176, 208, 217, 271, 288, 295, 300, 310, 348-9
blocking
  force, 98-9, 124, 255, 318
  position, 124
blood, 6, 17, 21, 49-50, 71-2, 82-3, 100, 147-8, 150, 154, 165, 191-2, 199, 201, 215, 221-2, 224, 227-30, 236-7, 242, 244-6, 248, 253, 255, 257, 275, 290-1,297
  drive(s), 49-50
Bockman, Karl (Karl Falster) (LCpl), 111-3, 137, 209, 211-2, 306, 310, 348
Boxill, Fred (Cpl), 39, 115-6, 130, 148, 150, 157-8, 171, 173, 197, 199-200, 202, 262, 306, 310-11
bomb
  crater, 82, 93-5, 129, 134, 142, 152, 163, 167, 169-70, 175, 179, 190, 193, 201-2, 214, 226, 237, 241, 266
booby trap(s), 45, 48, 67-8, 77-8, 80-4, 90, 93, 99-100, 129, 262, 287
boondockers, 7, 318
boot camp, 6, 8, 10, 12-23, 25-29, 31, 36, 40-1, 45-7, 61, 112-4, 213,

318
boots
combat (jungle), 50-1, 65, 69, 83, 131, 207, 230, 234-5, 237, 318
Boston College, 278
Bowman, Larry (LCpl), 101, 103
Boze, George C. (LCpl), 5, 12, 18, 21, 28-9, 40, 48-9, 63, 91, 167, 169-70, 179, 187, 193, 201-2, 213-5, 224, 226-7, 230, 234, 236-7, 256, 258, 283, 296, 306, 311, 348
Bravo Company, First Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, 57, 259
bridge
at Dien Ban, 55, 104-6, 204
Brittan, John A. (Cpl), 92, 306, 311
Bronze Star with Combat "V", 260, 305, 308-9, 318, 335, 343
Brothers, Gerald J. (PFC), 3, 12, 41, 300, 311, 348
Brown
Calvin F. (GySgt), 88
Vaughn (PFC), 261
Bruce, Lenny, 3
buddy plan, 10, 13, 16, 112, 314, 318
Buddhist Temple, 81
Budweiser, 40
buffalo wallow, 92-3
bug juice, 52, 135, 137, 318
Bulldogs, 286
bunker(s), 52, 71-2, 97, 113, 118, 155, 262-6, 332, 341, 347
Butt, Dave, 126, 128, 263
C-4 explosive, 156-7, 233, 239-40, 318, 320
C-130 aircraft, 51, 80, 117, 216, 318
C-141 aircraft, 257, 318
C-Ration(s), 60, 96, 118, 131, 141, 175, 231, 282, 319
Cahill, Kevin A. (LCpl), 5, 16, 47-8, 78, 143, 146-50, 152-4, 156-7,

162-3, 292-3, 297-8, 311-2, 349
California
  Barstow, 37
  Bay Area, 118
  Coronado, 42, 316
  Eagle Rock, 128
  Harbor City, 308
  Los Angeles, 4, 8, 10, 40, 48, 104, 201, 268, 275-6, 310
  Monterey, 44, 45
  Morgan Hill, 218
  Palm Desert, 305
  Reseda, 40
  Sacramento, 111, 293
  San Bernardino, 21, 281, 315, 336
  San Diego, 12-14, 16, 20, 23, 27, 32, 38, 46, 53, 112, 281, 308,
  MCRD, 12-4, 32, 281, 342
  police officer, 308
  probate investigator, 308
  San Fernando Valley, 3
  San Francisco, 280, 293
  Santa Rosa, 308
  Silicon Valley, 118, 305
  Stockton, 276
  Tustin, 20
Calistro, Mike, 348
Calvary Cemetery, 268
Cam Ranh Bay, 259
Cam Thanh, 57
camaraderie, 107, 293-4
Camil, Scott (Sgt), 9, 11, 16, 44, 46, 50, 80, 98, 130, 162,
Camp
  Geiger, 27-9, 39, 319, 330
  Hansen, Okinawa, 49, 319, 331
  Lejeune, 27, 36-9, 298, 319
  Pendleton, 18, 20, 27-9, 54, 113, 319
  San Onofre, 27, 319, 330

canteen(s), 29, 67, 131-2, 135, 154,214, 232, 324
Carlton, David (Cpl), 93-5
Carter, Harlan, 67-8
Carter, Marshall (Captain), 62, 88, 311, 348
Castanon, Margaret, 271, 300, 348
Castillo
  John J. (PFC), 5, 8, 41, 218, 270-1, 300-1, 311, 348
  Rose, 301, 348
  Theresa, 271, 300
Catholic, 4-5, 16, 84, 91, 111, 126-7, 299
Central Michigan University, 8
Chambers, Kenneth E. (LCpl), 106, 204-6, 311
Charlie Company, First Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, 3, 19, 46-8, 71-2, 115-9, 129, 141-3, 152, 161-2, 185, 202-3, 206, 253-7, 260-4, 275-6, 286-7, 310-5, 317
chieu hoi, 254, 320
China Beach, 96, 320
Chinese communist grenades (Chicom), 71, 154, 320
chopped OpCon, 123
Chosin Reservoir, 106
Christian, 15, 291, 297
Christianity, 291, 297
Christmas(es), 29, 39-40, 48, 301
chopper, 51, 129-30, 161-2, 217-8, 225-30, 243-5, 266
Chu Lai, 67, 104, 286, 339
Church, Bill, 78, 292
Church
  Catholic, 4-5, 91
Church, Michael A. (LCpl), 78, 82-3, 311
claymore mine, 97, 320
Code of Conduct, 15, 321
Cole, Michael P. (LCpl), 6, 29, 115-6, 157, 197-8, 226, 262-5, 303, 306-7, 310-1, 348
Columbus College of Art and Design, 112
Colorado

Denver, 15, 40, 208, 310

Command Post (CP), 55, 321
commander(s)
battalion, 88, 90-1, 106-7, 143, 145, 203, 224, 255, 258, 310
company, 26, 42, 89, 114, 224, 312
regimental, 87, 255

company
commander(s), 26, 42, 89, 114, 281, 291, 312, 314
executive officer (XO), 42-3, 114, 324
patrol base, 52, 89, 322, 329, 342

confidence course, 19, 337
Conklin, Dick, 113, 234-5, 236-7, 307, 311, 348
connecting file, 119-20
Con Thien, 118, 123, 207, 210, 258-9, 263-4
Continental Airlines, 49, 51
Cook, Joseph C. (Cpl), 174
Cooks and Bakers, 305
Cooley, William H.(SSgt), 137, 141, 179, 191-2, 218
Coons, Clifford, 100-1
Coral Sea, USS, 38, 115
Coss, Ronald L. (LCpl), 6, 44, 52, 81-4, 158, 174, 191, 201, 204, 234, 241, 244, 282, 284, 291, 307, 312, 348
Cottage Grove Cemetery, 267
Cottage Grove High School, 267
cover man, 26, 82, 142, 323
court(s)-martial, 244 346
counterattack, 159, 186, 190-1, 193-6, 201-2, 204-6, 214, 216, 222
Cramer, Mack, 348
crater
bomb, *See bomb crater*

Da Nang, 33, 46-52, 80, 104, 116-8, 264-5, 323, 329
daisy chain, 82, 101

Dalrymple, Larry J. (Cpl), 162
Davis and Elkins College, 19
De Abre, James M. (PFC), 218, 312
Dear John letter, 15, 53, 323
defensive perimeter, 83, 101, 103, 142, 152, 164, 209, 248
Dehner, Don (PFC), 224
Delayed Entry Program, 323
Delta Company, First Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, 57, 109, 133, 159, 167, 175, 203, 208-18, 224-5, 237-9, 289, 317
Delta College, 8
demolition(s), 28, 218, 233
Desert Storm, 294
diarrhea, 73, 248
Dickerson, Douglas (LCpl), 99, 101
Dien Ban, 55, 104-6, 204
Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), 33
Democratic National Convention, 282
Distinguished Flying Cross, 260, 323
Dombrosky, Chet (Second Lieutenant), 82-3, 97
Dong Ha, 33, 117-8, 123, 246, 262, 323, 324
Dougherty
  George (Cpl), 4, 32, 81-4, 127, 162, 186, 241-2, 296, 348
  Randi, 307
Douglas AC-47 gunship (Puff the Magic Dragon), *See Puff the Magic Dragon*
Dove
  Landing Zone, 127, 159, 247-8
Dowd, Wayne F. (HM3), 8, 31, 72-3, 156, 292-3, 297-8, 307, 311-2, 348
dress blues, 6, 73, 105, 112
Drill Instructor (DI), 13-18, 343
dud

artillery shells, 81-2, 101
grenades, 71
mortar round(s), 81, 98, 101

dysentery
amoebic, 46, 58,

Eadie, Gordon (LCpl), 101
Edson, Merritt A. (Marksmanship Trophy), 25
Edwards
Doff (Cpl), 78, 143, 146-8, 153-5, 311-2

Eisenson, Henry L. (Captain), 161-2, 260, 312
Eighth Marine Regiment, 42-3, 114
El Toro, Marine Corps Air Station, 48, 286, 333
engineers
combat, 104, 124, 218

entrenching tool(s), 204-6, 324
Esprit de Corps, 324
Ewing, Bill, 117, 152
Ezarnack, Norman R. (Cpl) (Short Round), 94

FAC, *See Forward Air Control (FAC) Team*
Falster, Karl (Karl Bockman) (LCpl), *See Bockman, Karl*
field
gear, 51, 324, 330
hospital, 63, 246-7, 261, 325, 334
pack, 225

Field Medical School, 8, 31-2, 44, 52, 335
.50 caliber machine gun, 264
Fire Direction Center (FDC), 29, 325

firefight, 64-5, 77, 131, 170, 196, 223, 255, 325
fireteam

leader, 58, 92, 106, 172, 204, 229, 310-1, 313

first aid
kit, 73, 170, 318, 331

First Battalion, First Marines, 3, 46-9, 103,
First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry, United States Army, 36
First Marine Division, 3, 20, 46, 49, 55, 106, 123, 305
flank
security, 119, 210, 322

Florida
Lake Worth, 39
Miami, 283
Pensacola, 308
Pompano Beach, 4

Foote, Bradford L. (Pvt), 4-5, 46, 52-3, 91, 128, 267, 303, 307, 348
Fort Logan National Cemetery, 271
Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, 37
Forward Air Control (FAC) Team, 124, 161, 345
Fox Company, Second Battalion, Eighth Marines, Second Marine Division, 105-6
foxhole(s), 52, 127, 142, 210, 325-6
Fourth of July, 52, 88, 147, 193
France, 35
free-fire zone, 60

Gainesville, 8
Gallagher, James (Captain), 111, 210-1, 213-4, 312,
gas mask(s), 200-1
gatling gun(s), 216
Georgetown University
Law School, 308
Gemborys, J.C., 81-2, 90
Gerba, Terry, 117, 152

Germany,
Frankfurt, 306
Gibson, John, 117, 152, 167, 169-70, 179
Gilliam
Carolyn Bice, 5
Golf Company, Second Battalion, Third Marines, Third Marine Division, 42
Great Depression, The, 105
Great Lakes Naval Hospital, 31, 257
Green Berets, The, 49
Green Berets, 67
grenadier, 58, 166, 222, 327, 344
grenade, 8, 46, 95, 131, 151-5, 169-81, 197-203, 214, 225-8, 235-7, 258-9, 307, 326-7, 347
Greson, Willie, 117, 152
Griffin
Glenn (Cpl), 109, 135, 209-11, 265, 312, 348
Sandra, 307
Guadalcanal, 113
Guam, USS, 43, 114
Guantanamo Bay, 39, 42, 97
guerilla, 44, 63, 328, 347
Guidon Bearer, Platoon, 328
Gung Ho, 190
Gunnery Sergeant (Gunny), 49, 101, 212, 239-40, 349
gunship,
Huey Cobra, 248
Guntor, William, 129, 190, 348
Guyot, Michael L. (Cpl), 101

H-harness, 193, 324
Hai Lang
National Forest, 118, 121, 123-7, 253-4, 328

Haiphong Harbor, 285, 328
Halcus, Barry, 82
halizone tablets, 92
Hamamoto, Cecilia Bazulto, 299,
hammer and anvil, 65-6, 90, 98-9, 119, 328
Hammergren, Kermit A. (HN), 4, 83, 165-6, 202, 247, 280, 296, 307, 312, 348
Hanoi, 33, 206, 285
Hanoi Hannah, 206, 328
Hartranft, Philip (SSgt), 7, 46, 114-5, 135, 171-2, 190, 218, 221, 223, 266, 349
Hawaii, 6, 49-50, 263
Headrick, Robert (LCpl), 82, 164, 223, 307, 313
Headquarters
  Battalion, 57-8, 63, 106, 144, 237-8, 317, 324, 340-1
  Division, 87
  group, 144, 321
  Marine Corps, 54, 233, 323
  Regimental, 103

heat
  prostration, 132

Heaven, 214, 297
hedgerows, 62, 118
Helicopter Support Team (HST), 124, 144, 329
Hell's Angels, 82
Helm, Hugh N. (Cpl), 98-100, 102, 262, 308, 313, 349-50
hemostat, 242
high explosive rounds (HE), 155, 335
High Plains Drifter, 280
hippie, 45, 158, 267
Hitler, 351
Ho Chi Minh, 187
Hoffman, 212

Hoi An, 33, 49, 68-9, 96, 342
Hollywood Marine, 12-3, 329
Holy Cross College, 105
Hong Kong, 263
hooch, 65-6, 87, 329
Horseshoe, The, 55, 57, 88, 329
Hue City, 33, 207, 264-5, 327
Huey Cobra gunship, 248
Hutchings, George P. (Cpl), 7-8, 52, 115, 234-7, 349

I Corps, 163, 323
Ia Drang Valley, 36, 330
Iceland, 289
Illinois
  Chicago, 80, 281-2
  Mount Prospect, 7
  Winnetka Park District, 306
illumination round, 52, 174, 178, 217, 335
Inchon Landing, 105
Indiana
  Macy, 309

Infantry Training Regiment (ITR), 25-9, 32, 37-41, 113-4, 330
intelligence, 20, 62, 90, 98, 224, 340
International Harvester, 284, 307
Iraq, 280
Isaiah, 297
Island, The, 55
Iwo Jima, 49, 113

Jackson, R.J. (LCpl), 3, 22, 49-50, 126, 130-1, 153-4, 189, 234-8, 276-7, 308, 349
Jandt, Teresa Ruffer, 267

jeep, 87-9, 340
Jesus Christ, 127, 169, 236, 277
Johnson, President Lyndon B., 36
Jones, Jennifer, 38
Judge Advocate General (JAG), 107, 331
jungle
  bamboo, 66-7, 81-3, 98
  canopy, 151-2, 244

KA-Bar, 131, 196, 331
Kane, Stephen M. (PFC), 5, 21, 50, 126-7, 162, 187, 265-6, 349
Kemp, Robert Victor “Vic” (First Lieutenant), 39, 97-104, 119, 262, 288, 313
Kennedy
  Robert F. (Bobby), 276
Kentucky
  Bowling Green, 309
  Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Air Quality, 309
  Louisville, 13, 41, 315
Key Span Energy Corporation, 307
Khe Sanh, 123, 207, 264-6, 331
Kin Village, 49, 331
King, Martin Luther, Jr., 276
knives
  KA-Bar, 131, 204-5, 331
  Randall, 131
Kolas, Robert (LCpl), 101
Kootenai National Forest, 309
Korea(n), 6, 20-1, 105-6, 295, 341
Krisko, Edward M. (Pvt), 6, 53, 143-4, 257, 308, 313, 349
Kuwait, 298

Lampo, Steven (First Lieutenant), 209-10, 313

Landing Zone (LZ), 62, 157-59, 224-8,
Lardy, Ray, 65-6
Last Rites, 73, 163
LaVallee, Michael E. (LCpl), 5, 98-100, 104, 126, 152, 176,
LeBlanc, Beth, 349
Leahy, A. Michael (Major), 225-6, 231, 233, 284-5, 349-50
leave, 16, 29, 39-41, 45-6, 114, 277, 332
Leatherneck Magazine, 127, 171, 350
Lee
  Dennis, 267-8, 300, 349
  John R. (Cpl), 6, 12, 52-3, 167, 267-8, 312-3,
Legion of Merit, 6, 332
Leonard, Jimmie C. (Cpl), 174
Lesnik, Michael E. (Captain), 161, 179
Lewis, Rod (Cpl), 5, 29, 50, 126, 153-4, 186, 226, 238, 265, 289, 349
Light Antitank Assault Weapon (LAAW), 39, 344
Livingston, Thomas E. (Sgt), 156-7, 172, 194, 314
Lockheed AC-130 gunship (Spooky), *See Spooky*
Long Beach Naval Hospital, 31
Louisiana
  Covington, 308, 313
Lyons, Ben (Father), 126

M14, 29, 48, 64, 225, 333
M16, 29, 64-8, 130-1, 178-80, 186, 202, 212, 236, 240-1, 278, 333
M60
  machine gun(s), 64, 114, 211-2, 248, 333
M79
  grenade launcher, 27, 58, 226, 327
McCormack, James (SSgt), 100-1
McEachron, Paul (PFC), 100-1
McIlwain, James, 117, 152
McKean, Mike, 65-6

Magnum P.I., 291
Major, William D. (Captain), 3, 25-7, 78, 97-8, 129-30, 151-3, 167-9, 200, 216-7, 224-5, 242-9, 275, 349
malaria, 47, 73, 137
marijuana, 77, 115, 283
Marine Corps
  Combat Correspondents, Photographers and Artists Association, 308, 314
Marines' Hymn, 189-90
Marine Reserves, 333, 341
Marinoff, David, 349
Martin, Bruce A. (SSgt), 127, 171, 308, 350
Maryland,
  University of (Overseas Extension Program), 20
Mass, Catholic, 79, 84, 126, 299
Massachusetts
  Boston, 5, 47-8, 157, 278-9, 310
  Brookline, 5, 315
  Framingham, 105, 310
  Lawrence, 5, 126, 308, 313
  New Bedford, 305
  Somerville, 313
  Worcester, 105
MCRD Parris Island, 333
MCRD San Diego, 12-4, 32, 342
mess duty, 37, 50, 69-70, 334
Michigan
  Detroit, 11, 314
  Petoskey, 306
  Saginaw, 5
Midshipmen (Naval Academy), 278-9, 334
Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), 28-30, 341
mine
  claymore, 97, 320
mini-gun(s), 70, 216, 338

Minnesota
Minneapolis, 5, 262
Missouri
El Dorado Springs, 6, 312
Kansas City, 280
Leopold, 7
Nevada, 307

Missouri Baptist University, 277
Mitchell, Philip (LCpl), 261
Mojave Desert, 63
mortar(s)
81mm, 28-9, 58, 63, 69-70, 79, 131-2, 310-1, 335

morphine, 72, 83, 100-1, 150, 242
Mud Flats, The, 57, 65-6, 335
Mulder, Jerry, 46
Murphy, Walt, 288

NSA Hospital Da Nang, 258
NSA Tong River (Korea), 105
NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), 289
Naval
Academy, 8, 278, 335
Hospital, 290

Navy
& Marine Corps Achievement Medal, 293, 335
Commendation Medal, 260, 305, 335
corpsman, *See corpsman and corpsmen*

Nelson, Paul S. (First Lieutenant), 3, 26-7, 49, 77-8, 89-90, 104, 124-5, 142-52, 156-7, 162-3, 229, 256-7, 279-80, 290, 292, 306, 349
Nevada
Las Vegas, 315
Nevada Gaming Commission, 308
Nevada Habilitation Center, 307

Newhart, Bob, 3
New Jersey
  Hackensack, 113
  Newark, 275
New York
  Brooklyn, 4, 82
  Coram, 309, 315
  Johnson City, 113, 311
  East Springfield, 117, 315
  Staten Island, 307, 312
  Syracuse, 307
Nixon, President Richard M., 259, 285
Noble, Mike (T.C.), 72, 154, 314
non-commissioned officer (NCO), 20, 38, 264, 344
Norton Air Force Base, 43, 281, 336
North Carolina
  Charlotte, 13, 45, 315
  New Bern, 309
  Zebulon, 307
North Vietnamese Army (NVA), 35-6, 18-9, 164-66, 85-90, 200-6, 221-2, 226-8, 235-9, 253-4, 347
Northeastern University School of Law, 309

O'Hare Airport, 282
observation post (OP), 25, 336
Objective 5,
  Regimental, 130, 142, 144, 159, 163, 217, 238
Officer Candidates School (OCS), 8-9, 343
Ohio
  Barberton, 306, 310
  Springfield, 6, 307,312

Okinawa, 6, 41-2, 46-51, 265, 319, 333, 336
Onslow Beach, Camp Lejeune, 37
Operation
  Calhoun, 71

Pike, 78, 90-1, 305
Stone, 117
Swift, 210

ordnance, 81, 246, 336
Oregon
Beaverton, 66
Bend, 4, 312
Cottage Grove, 12, 267
Creswell, 218, 313
Eugene, 300
Lake Oswego, 308,
LaPine, 307
Portland, 31, 308
Oval Office, 269

Pacur, 308
Panama, 114, 331
Parris Island, *See MCRD Parris Island*
Pasadena City College, 277
Payne, 213
Pearl Harbor, 6
Pelkey, Ronald (GySgt), 210, 212, 234, 349
Pennsylvania
Enola, 307
Montgomery, 307
Pittsburgh, 279
Philadelphia, 82, 237, 312
perimeter
defense, 88-9, 97, 118, 136, 167, 239-40, 337

Perkins
Marilane, 269, 299
William T. Jr. (Cpl), 3, 10-1, 126-8, 157-8, 197-200, 230-3, 269-70, 298-9, 314, 349

Petro, George E. (Lieutenant Colonel), 84, 105

photographer
  combat, 126-7, 135, 197, 223, 308, 321
Phu Bai, 33, 254
Physical Conditioning Platoon (Special Training Branch), 14, 337
Pittsburgh,
  University of, 279
plasma, 72, 215
Pocono, USS, 38
police officer
  Miami, 283
point
  of the spear, 78, 125, 239
polio, 111
Pompano Beach, Florida, 4,
Portland State University, 8, 308
Portsmouth Naval Hospital, 257
Posnick, Monica, 349
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), 288, 338
Postal Service, U.S., 307
prayer, 4-5, 91, 188, 299
Priddy, Jim, 3, 10-1, 13-4, 60, 270, 314, 349
propaganda, 193, 328
Puerto Rico, 114
Puff the Magic Dragon (Douglas AC-47 gunship), 70, 215-7, 338, 344
Puller, Lewis Burwell "Chesty" (Lieutenant General), 287 Purple Heart, 78
PX, 31, 117, 338

Quang Nam, 33, 62
Quang Tin, 339
Quantico, 8, 46, 196, 319, 336, 339
Quonset Hut, 96, 339

radio
  battery, 130-1
  communication(s), 26, 28, 38, 89, 130, 132, 144, 168, 210, 325, 332
  PRC-41, p. 131
  transistor, 206

radioman (company, platoon, squad), 26, 78-9, 82-3, 93, 98-9, 130, 148, 171, 231, 310-5,
Raid, The, 61-2, 88, 309
Rainbolt, Michael, 349
recoilless rifle, 106mm, 28,
reconnaissance, 25, 42-3, 107, 316, 324, 340, 342

regimental commander, 87, 255
Regimental Objective 5, 130, 163, 238
Regional Force (RF), 105-6, 204, 340
relief in place, 263
Repose, USS, 247
Republican National Convention, 283
Reserves,
  Marine, 333, 341
reverse slope defense, 233, 340
rice paddy, 47, 62-3, 73, 118, 136
Riddle, William (Cpl), 91
rocket(s)
  barrier defense, 57
  launcher, 3.5-inch, 28, 116, 135, 154-5, 207, 316, 341, 344

rotation, 42, 108, 345
ROTC, 105, 111
rigor mortis, 223, 228
Robertson, Clifton (Second Lieutenant), 104
Robertson, Donn J. (Major General), 106
Robinson, Edward M. (Mike) (PFC), 5, 27, 63-5, 142, 150-1, 188-9, 214, 233, 263, 284, 292, 303, 314, 349
rookie, 61, 116, 212

Rose Garden, 269
Ruffner's (sic) Raiders, 120, 130
Ruffer
  Jack A. (First Lieutenant), 3, 6-7, 20-1, 42-3, 118-20, 132-4, 146, 167-9, 211-3, 227-31, 260, 286, 315, 349-50
  Pat, 43-4, 60, 176, 267, 305, 349
  Terri, *See Teresa Ruffer Jandt,* 267
Rules of Engagement, 286

Saigon, 285,
sampan, 81
San Diego, *See MCRD San Diego*
sandbags, 51, 97, 322, 337
Sand Dunes, The, 52, 57, 81, 88, 342
Sands of Iwo Jima, The, 7
sapper, 104
scout/sniper, 30, 50, 342
school yellow, 196
scorpion, 57, 80-1, 342
sea bag, 50, 342
Seabees, 118, 123, 249, 342
Sea Wolf
  Zodiac wristwatch, 197
Selznick, David O., 38
Seymour, Philip A. (Sgt), 5, 22, 61-2, 130, 169-70, 215, 291, 349
782 Gear, 170, 330
shitter, 63
Silver Star Medal, 260, 305, 343
Sinatra, Nancy, 41
Site X, 118, 129, 248-9, 261-2
situation report, 104
six-by, 47, 63, 343
smoke rounds, 79

Snell, Robert D. (Dan) (LCpl), 5, 13-4, 102-4, 137, 180, 238, 280-1, 309, 349
solatia payment, 68
Sooter, C.W. (First Lieutenant), 88
South Carolina
  Charleston, 112, 310
  Okatie, 305
South China Sea, 33, 57, 63, 80, 90, 247, 346
Spadaro, Victor, 82, 90
Spooky (Lockheed AC-130 gunship), 215-7, 318, 344
squad
  ABC, 39, 115-6, 198, 262, 310-1
  machine gun, 116
  mortar, 116, 167, 179
St. Louis Cardinals, 126, 261
Stardust, 308
Story, Chesley (PFC), 261
strobe light, 198
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 278
Sutton, Bob (Cpl), 224
sweep, 65-7, 125-6, 258, 345
Swoboda, Kelly Blessing, 271

TNT, 155
Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR), 57, 88, 111, 345
tear gas, 200-1
terrorists, 118
Tennessee
  Clarksville, 36
Tet Offensive, 264, 305
Texas
  Colleyville, 306, 311
  Fort Worth, 278

Third Marine Division, 42, 118, 123, 336
Thompson, Thomas (GySgt), 88, 144-5, 222, 234, 244-6, 309, 315
Thorne, Scott (PFC), 3, 18, 38, 162, 224, 284, 349
ticker tape parade, 280, 351
Tojo, 351
Toschi, Richard (Sgt), 71, 81-2, 90
tracer(s), 70, 200-1, 214, 346
Traveling Wall, 300
trench foot, 73
Trung Giang River, 90

Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), 15, 331
Unit One, 72, 132, 165, 217, 318, 346
UH-34
  helicopter, 48, 129, 161, 312, 346
USO, 38, 346
utilities
  jungle, *See jungle utilities*

Van Winkle, Archie (Lieutenant Colonel), 126
Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), 307
Vietnam
  Memorial (The Wall), 294
Vietnamese
  Cross of Gallantry, 260, 347
Viet Cong (VC), 35, 62-4, 89-93, 98-101, 320, 347
Virginia
  Quantico, 8, 46, 278, 336, 339
  Richmond, 106, 311

Wake Island, 49
Walton, Roger E. (PFC), 117, 151-2, 169-70, 226, 315
Warf, Robert J. (Sgt), 91-2, 243

Watergate
  hearings, 308
WAVE, Navy, 6
Weapons Platoon, *See Platoon, Weapons*
wedge formation, 81
Welsh, David A. (Cpl), 5, 100-3, 168-9, 215, 282, 294-5, 315, 349
WestPac, 37, 347
White Beach (Okinawa), 48
whistles
  NVA, 165, 172-3, 176, 187, 200
Wisconsin
  Oshkosh, 233, 315
Woodard, Jon, 109, 265
WWII, 4, 105, 154, 295, 328, 351

Yates, Edward R. (Rowdy) (Cpl), 5, 80-3, 155, 206, 236-7, 309, 349
Yale University, 4, 5, 19

Zorn, Joseph J. (LCpl), 4, 6, 28, 36, 52, 82-3, 94, 96-7, 135, 154-5, 158, 174, 191, 201, 204, 207, 211-2, 222, 234, 241-2, 249, 276-7, 288, 303, 309, 315, 349
Zodiac
  Sea Wolf wristwatch, *See Sea Wolf*

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